'She brings the East End to life' Barbara Windsor

SALLY WORBOYES

DOWN STEPNEY WAY

Two Novels in One Volume

DOCKER'S DAUGHTER

About the author

Sally Worboyes was born and grew up in Stepney with four brothers and a sister, and she brings some of the raw history of her own family background to her East End sagas. She now lives in Norfolk with her husband, with whom she has three grown-up children. She has written several plays which have been broadcast on BBC Radio Four and Anglia Television. She also adapted her own play and novel, *Wild Hops*, as a musical for production at the Mermaid Theatre.

Also by Sally Worboyes

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SALLY WORBOYES

Down Stepney Way
Docker's Daughter

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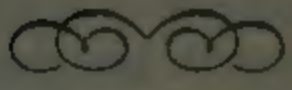
Down Stepney Way

For Mum

My thanks to Kirsty Fowkes and Jane Heller

Chapter One



1936

In the clear October morning, clusters of people from around the East End were gathering in Cable Street with one aim in mind – to stop the Blackshirts from marching through Stepney. Some were filling their pockets with stones from ready-made piles while others armed themselves with pieces of splintered wood and bottles. The sombre mood changed to one of unease when a local lad arrived, excited and out of breath, to announce that the march had begun. The Jewish Party and the Communists were joining forces to make it clear that the Fascists would *not* get through.

Oswald Mosley had originally planned to meet his legion at Royal Mint Street, march on to Aldgate, along Commercial Road and into Salmon Lane in Limehouse, where a big outdoor meeting was to be held, but the route had been changed. He was in fact leading the Blackshirts along the Highway by the docks towards Cable Street.

The police were out in force, there to see the procession through without trouble; but men, women and children were ready to rebel against authority and had come out to make their voices heard and to show their outrage. Along the route barricades had been built of beds, chairs, and anything else that the people could lay their hands on. Prepared for the worst,

the Jewish Party had set up a first-aid post in Aldgate, near the Whitechapel library, and a team of cyclist messengers had been organised between main points and headquarters. Another team was ready to rally those still inside their homes and urge them to come out and help stop the march of the Fascists.

Suddenly another young messenger climbed onto a makeshift platform and yelled, 'They're coming! They're coming! The Blackshirts are coming!'

There was a roar of protest and then the brass band began to play. Soon the streets were filled with patriotic song: 'Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves, Britons never never never Shall be slaves . . .'

Jessie Warner gripped her younger brothers' hands and pulled them through the seething mob. Pushing and dragging the boys, she wove her way through as best she could, cursing herself for taking this route home from the Tower of London.

'Is it a war, Jessie? Is it?' Stephen, the seven-year-old, was too frightened to cry.

'No, Stephen, but we shouldn't be here! There's going to be a fight!'

'Why, Jessie? Why are they going to fight? They're grown-ups . . .'

'Just don't let go of my hand,' she ordered.

'It's the Blackshirt march, Stephen!' screeched Alfie, fired up and doing his utmost to pull away from his sister. 'We can watch from a side road!'

'No! Keep moving!' Jessie kept a tight hold on both of them but the sudden jerking as thirteen-year-old Alfie stopped in his tracks caused her to lose her balance and twist her ankle. Her scream shot through the noise of the mob but was ignored. She limped across the pavement to sit on the windowsill of an old terraced house.

'You shouldn't have done that, Alfie,' said Jessie, wincing in pain. 'You could have brought the three of us down.'

Alfie wasn't listening; stretched to full height and craning

his neck, he was desperate to get a view through the ever growing assembly. 'I'm gonna make my way up the Highway to watch 'em march!'

'You are not! You stay right where you are until this pain eases, then we'll go home, *together*.'

'Come out of your houses!' a young Jewish lad flew by, yelling at top voice. 'They're on their way. Come out and fight!' He was waving a red flag. 'The police are there as well! The police are coming!'

'It *is* a war, Jessie,' murmured Stephen, tears now rolling down his cheeks. 'They're going to blow us up. I want to go home.'

'We will, sweetheart. We will. Just give me a minute.' She pulled the silk scarf from her neck and tied it round her ankle.

'Ready now then, Jess?' asked Stephen, gripping her hand.

'Nearly.' Jessie removed her combs which had come loose, pulled her long wavy hair back and secured it. 'Now we'll go. We'll stop off at Grandfather's and—'

'The police are on horseback!' Alfie was beside himself. 'They've got batons and guns!'

Within seconds, stones and bottles were being thrown in the direction of the mounted police. Shouted insults followed. More stones. More bottles. The sound of breaking glass and yells of abuse were terrifying. 'Surrender!' yelled one man. 'They shall not pass! *They shall not pass!*' Others joined in with the chant and more groups arrived carrying banners. The noise reached a crescendo and Cable Street was packed with an army of civilians ripe for confrontation.

Alfie cheered loudly. 'They're pulling up railings and paving stones!' he said excitedly.

'We should go *now*, Jessie,' said Stephen, trying to be brave.

'Yes, we should.' Grabbing Alfie by the collar, Jessie hauled him away, defying the sickening pain shooting through her ankle.

Alfie half-heartedly struggled against her but deep down he, too, was frightened. The oncoming clatter of hooves on cobblestones and sound of breaking glass urged Jessie on and gave her the strength of two people. She pushed through the mob, her ears ringing with the roar of the protesters: 'Down with the Fascists! Fuck off to Germany! Sod off to Spain! Go and live in Italy! Get out of England!'

When the three of them reached their grandfather's house in Broom Court, Jessie was trembling. Stephen had stopped crying but the occasional sob still escaped as his mind filled with what he had seen and heard. Alfie was moody with himself because secretly he had wanted to leave the frightening scene. But he could always blame his big sister – it was she, after all, who had forced him away. Still, he was angry at missing an opportunity to throw stones at the police.

'It's not fair,' he grumbled. 'There were lots of kids there who were younger than me. I shouldn't 'ave took any notice of you, Jessie. If it wasn't for you hurting your ankle, I wouldn't 'ave come away.'

'Shut up, Alfie, and don't you *dare* cheek Grandmother Blake this time.' Instead of knocking respectfully on the door, as she would normally, Jessie found herself banging the knocker with some urgency. Grandmother Blake appeared looking very stern and disapproving.

'I'm sorry,' said Jessie, shrinking, 'we were in Cable Street and—'

'You've woken your grandfather,' came the terse reply. 'You shouldn't be knocking at all, never mind nearly smashing the door down. What do you want?'

'If we could just come in … I've sprained my ankle and—'

'If you could walk from Cable Street to here, you can walk home. Let your mother see to you.' Her unyielding expression showed no sign of weakening as she began to close the door.

'I'm very thirsty,' said the brave Stephen, 'and Jessie's ankle is very, very swollen!'

Glancing dispassionately at Jessie's leg, Grandmother Blake raised her eyes and sighed. 'That's nothing. Tell your mother to put a cold flannel on it.'

'If we can just come into the passage for a tiny while,' pleaded Jessie. Her ankle was throbbing badly. 'I need to sit down on the stairs and if Stephen could have a glass of water—'

'No. Your grandfather's resting. He needs the quiet.' The door was slowly closing between them when Jessie heard the familiar quiet cough of her grandfather in the passage.

'That's all right,' came the softer voice of the man she loved. 'Let them come in for a minute.'

'Please yourself,' said Grandmother Blake, turning away. 'They can wait in the hall. I'll fetch a glass of water.'

'You shouldn't bang on the door like that,' said Willy, as his grandchildren filed in. 'What's the matter?' He looked from the boys to Jessie. 'Did someone hurt you?'

Alfie peered up at him. 'What's a Fascist?'

Quietly chuckling, Willy pulled on his braces. 'Someone who's not a Jew. Why?'

'There's a battle going on in Cable Street and—'

'Blackshirts and Reds,' sighed Willy, rolling his eyes. 'I might have guessed. Go on down into the scullery, you can wrap a wet cloth round that ankle, Jessie. I'll get Grandmother Blake to make a pot of weak tea to warm your bellies, then be off home.' Gazing into Jessie's frightened face he tried to comfort her with one of his infrequent smiles. 'Gang warfare, that's all it is. Give it a month and it'll be forgotten.'

'I'm sorry we didn't go straight home, Grandfather, but my ankle – I could hardly walk another step.'

'That's all right,' he said. 'you did the right thing, but don't stay too long. You know your grandmother likes her quiet.'

That was the last time Jessie saw her grandfather alive. A few

weeks later, Willy returned from a day's work at his cobbler shop, sat down by the fire and slept his last sleep. He had told no one about the severe pains in his chest that had been troubling him of late.

Jessie took his death very badly, crying into her pillow nightly and asking the same question of God over and over. Why? Why him? Why was her grandfather dead when there were so many wicked people walking about in the streets?

Unlike Willy's other grandchildren, Jessie had been a regular visitor to 10 Broom Court since she was old enough to walk there on her own. Sometimes when she'd banged the iron knocker of the dark green door, one of her uncles would appear in the doorway, frowning. He'd put a finger to his lips and whisper in warning, 'Grandfather's in a mood.'

Shrugging, Jessie would slip past, along the narrow passageway and down the staircase to the basement where she knew he would be sitting in his armchair, looking into the glowing coals of the fire. Willy Blake had spent most of his leisure time thinking or reading. When he was absorbed in a book, Jessie would tiptoe across the room, lower herself into the other armchair by the fire and keep quiet until spoken to.

She loved the small, quiet room, with just the sound of the hissing coals, the rustle of a page as he turned it, and the breathing of his black mongrel dog, Peggy, who lay quietly at his feet. It was here that she discovered the reward of patience. When in the right mood, her grandfather would draw her into his private world, arousing her interest and curiosity. Then, he would tell her fascinating stories of times gone by. Other times, not one single word passed between them. He would end the visit by closing his book and giving her a nod or she would leave of her own accord, sensing his mood, and quietly pull the door shut behind her until she heard the brass catch drop.

When arrangements were being made for his funeral, Jessie was mortified to hear that even though she was sixteen, a

working girl and the eldest of her brothers and sister, she was still considered too young to attend his funeral.

'It's not an occasion for young people, Jessie,' explained her mother, Rose. 'Stop fussing now and be more like your brothers and sister. They don't want to go.'

But Jessie did want to go, very much. There had been a special bond between her and her grandfather. She had inherited his Germanic looks, hair so blonde it was almost white and blue eyes, and was the only grandchild to have done so. She knew she was closer to him than any of the others.

On the day he was buried, Jessie stood with her arms woven through the black railings outside his house in Broom Court, watching with the neighbours as the hearse slowly pulled away. The sound of the horses' hooves echoing on the flagstones reminded her of the last day she saw him alive, the day of the Cable Street battle.

An occasional shake of the head and pursing of lips were the only movements from onlookers. To the people who lived in the courtyard, he was an ordinary man, of few words, who'd always return a smile and doff his hat or cap and who kept himself to himself. A silver-haired gentleman, no more, no less.

Jessie often thought about his last comforting words to her after the riot in Cable Street. *Give it a month and it'll be forgotten.* But he had been wrong. People were still talking about it. Communists were boasting that they had won the biggest fight in working-class history and the Blackshirts were angry because their march had been stopped. Insulting slogans against Jews were still appearing on walls in Jessie's neighbourhood.

Much to the family's dismay, Grandmother Blake soon married. Her new husband was a man with whom she had been having a secret affair. The grandchildren were told to call him Uncle. It was then that Jessie stopped going to the house. The mood there changed – the parties had begun. The piano in the best room, where Willy used to sit and play soft tunes, was used to accompany bawdy songs of the day, sung by the

gathering of boozy friends. Laughter and ribald conversation filled the place, forcing out any trace of Willy's presence as master of the house.

On her last visit and before the new 'uncle' moved in, Jessie asked permission to tidy the locked cupboard to the left of the fireplace where her grandfather used to sit. It was his private cupboard and no one had been allowed to pry into it. Grandmother Blake grudgingly let her, though it was clear the contents of the cupboard didn't interest her much. Jessie hadn't got far in her search for something that would remind her of him when she found a small worn family album. She didn't recognise anyone in any of the faded photographs except for the one of her grandfather, which was loose and at the back of the album. Younger though he was, his eyes and high cheekbones placed him. He was standing with one hand resting on the hood of a large, old-fashioned pram, and in the pram, cramped together in a space for one, were two baby girls, sitting up and smiling.

Before closing the album, Jessie found, tucked inside its leather cover, a marriage certificate – between William Ernest Gunter and Ingrid Weiss. She held her breath and stared at it, knowing it was important but not understanding why. Then, for the first time in her life Jessie stole something. She stole the certificate and the loose photograph, stuffing them quickly into her boot, half afraid Grandmother Blake would burst in and catch her. For some reason she felt that the two were connected and that the piece of paper belonged to Willy, even though the surname wasn't the one she knew him by. The name of the woman he'd married, according to the certificate, was a mystery too, because it wasn't the name of her grandmother, or at least not the name of the person she had believed to be her grandmother. Was it possible that the cold, unfeeling woman known to her as Grandmother Blake was not kin after all? *She's Willy's daughter, all right*, is what Jessie had heard said about her own mother, Rose, but she couldn't remember anyone saying that she was the daughter of Grandmother Blake.

With the marriage certificate and photo safely hidden inside her ankle boot, Jessie left that special room for the last time. Heart pounding, she took the stairs two at a time, terrified that she might be found out. Once outside in the street, she made her way home to Stepney Green, and in the privacy of the bedroom she shared with her sister, Dolly, she pulled the crinkled document from her boot and read it again. William Ernest Gunter, occupation shoemaker. Her grandfather's Christian names were William Ernest and he had been a shoemaker but the surname was wrong. His name, so everyone had been led to believe, was Blake, and the woman thought to be his wife was hardly German, and her name was not Ingrid.

Jessie glanced around her bedroom for a secure place to hide her finds. She fixed on the air vent which had a metal cover. She climbed onto a chair and slipped both the certificate and photograph inside, safe in the knowledge that she could reach in and take it out whenever she wanted. Happier, she lay down on her bed, feeling as if she still had a very special part of her grandfather to herself. She wondered if Ingrid Gunter might still be his wife and her own real grandmother. She must have died – it seemed the only explanation. Jessie allowed herself a brief dream that the old woman was alive and lived nearby.

Jessie felt a mixture of hope and warmth at the thought. Maybe the strange feeling that had come and gone all through her life could now be explained. The feeling that something or someone was missing from her world. She decided then that somehow she would find out the truth and perhaps discover **her real grandmother.**

On Christmas Eve, following Willy's death, Jessie woke to the sound of her father, Robert, coughing in the passage. His footsteps on the lino had seemed to be part of her dream, but from the thin stream of light shining through the gap under the bedroom door she could make out her surroundings and was relieved to realise that she was in her room and out of the

bad dream which had gripped her. Shadowy, evil men had been chasing her and her grandfather through dark woods. She had been having recurring nightmares since her grandfather died.

Safe and secure, she glanced at her sister Dolly, fast asleep in her bed a few feet away. Dolly, at the age of fifteen, slept as soundly as a baby. Alfie and little Stephen shared the bedroom next door and above them were the two attic rooms where the lodgers Mr and Mrs McCarthy lived.

Lying in her warm bed, with the sound of muted voices below, Jessie looked forward to the beginning of this special day, her seventeenth birthday. Hearing the mantel clock strike six, she did as she always did and drew her feather eiderdown round her, making the most of it. The room was freezing cold and condensation had iced on the inside of the window. She would wait until she heard the sound of the street door close behind her father as he went out into the frosty morning, on his way to the docks where he worked as a crane driver. Much as she wanted to see him before he went out, she knew he wouldn't have time to see her open her presents.

A few minutes after the street door closed behind him, she got up, wrapped her grey blanket round her and crept out of the room, only to find that her brother Alfie was in the passage, ready himself to creep downstairs.

'Where do you think you're going, Alfie?' said Jessie, all-knowing.

'To get a glass of water. I'm gasping.'

'Well, just you go back to bed and I'll fetch it up.' This wasn't the first time that Alfie had tried to creep downstairs on Christmas Eve before her.

'I can get it myself,' he barked. 'I'm not a cripple.'

Smiling at him, Jessie slowly shook her head. 'It won't work, you know. It's *my* birthday and you know that you're not allowed to go down before me. The same as none of us are allowed to go down before you on your birthday.'

'That was when we were kids,' he said. 'You're seventeen

now, and I'm nearly thirteen. I can't be bothered with all of that baby stuff.' He turned towards the staircase, but Jessie was too quick for him. She grabbed the corded waist of his pyjamas and would not let go.

'You're not too old for a clip round the ear,' she said. 'Now get back to bed and I'll bring you a glass of water up, and don't start arguing or you'll wake the lodgers. If they leave, Mum loses the rent and that means no pocket money for you and Stephen.'

'What do I care about pocket money? I'll be going to work soon.' He pulled away from her and slouched back to his room.

'Alfie, haven't you forgotten something?'

'No. Oh, yeah. Happy birthday,' he mumbled grudgingly.

She couldn't blame him, thought Jessie, going downstairs; it was, after all, Christmas Eve and as grown-up as Alfie liked to act, he was still a boy, especially at this time of year. More excited than little Stephen at times.

In the kitchen, after a birthday kiss and greeting from Rose, Jessie sat by the warm cooking range, her bare feet close to the glowing coals, and watched her mother lay the table. As well as the two best cups and saucers and small china plate of tea biscuits, Rose had spread the special lace-edged cloth the way she always did on her birthday and for some reason Jessie was reminded of the Christmas Eve morning when she was thirteen. Dolly had been given a new doll with arms and legs which were double-jointed, Alfie had got his train set and little Stephen, after months of pleading, was rewarded with something which was a strange request for a boy – a plain doll's house, made by their father, in which he'd placed quite a few of his lead soldiers.

Jessie had been given a red patent-leather box handbag and matching shoes, the first time she'd not been given a toy of some sort for Christmas. It was also the first time she had given Dolly one of her prize possessions. She gave her sister her bassinet pram for her new doll.

'I hope those boys are not going to come bounding down yet,' said Rose, breaking into her thoughts. 'There's a lot to do before I feed them.'

'I don't think they will.' Jessie's mind turned to her grandfather. She would miss the family visit made to him each year on Christmas morning, when he would be spruced up in his best clothes, with a small present for each of them piled up next to the fire. The few words that he repeated every year went through her mind. *It wasn't cheap so look after it.*

Gripped by a sudden need to touch and look at his photograph, she slipped out of the kitchen and went quietly to her bedroom. Standing on a chair, her hand inside the air vent, feeling for the secret document and photograph, she was appalled to find they had gone.

Rose's quiet voice behind her made her jump. 'I had a feeling you'd be digging around for those. You'd best come downstairs, Jessie.'

Jessie looked across to Dolly, worried.

'Don't fret about lazy bones,' said Rose. 'The house could fall in and she'd still sleep on. I dare say she's dreaming about Christmas time in the days of old.' Only one subject had interested the rebellious Dolly during her schooldays – the history of London from the time of the Romans who had named it Londinium. A casual reference to 'the twin-hilled City of the South ... girt about by fen and marshes' by her teacher had caught her imagination. From that day onwards, when she was no more than nine years old, Dolly had read and listened and questioned and bored to death even those who *were* interested in her chosen subject – and most were not.

Back in the kitchen, Rose, a little shaky, poured them both a cup of tea. 'I suppose your seventeenth birthday is as good a time as any to tell you a bit of home truth,' she said.

Ashamed, Jessie felt herself blush. 'I shouldn't have hidden Grandfather's things like that but, well, I wasn't sure what to do about them once I'd taken them and time just went on and—'

'It doesn't matter about that. I noticed that the metal cover on the air vent wasn't on properly. That's how I found your secret. The marriage certificate's safe now in my document box. Best we don't say anything to Dolly or the boys just yet.'

Flattered that her mother was speaking to her as an equal, Jessie rose to the occasion. 'I know you don't like me to be disrespectful but I've never really warmed to Grandmother Blake.'

'I know, but that's to be expected. She's not exactly put herself out for you, has she? She's not interested in any of my children, or me, for that matter, and I think you've worked out for yourself the reason why.' Rose sipped her tea, and waited.

'I'm not really sure, Mum, but I think I can guess.' Feeling as if she was treading on eggshells, Jessie went on, 'It was the name Gunter . . . and, well, I did happen to see your birth certificate once and on that you're down as Gunter as well. Rose Maud Gunter. I wasn't spying, it's just that—'

'You were curious. You don't have to feel bad about it. I'd be disappointed if you didn't care less. Grandmother Blake is *not* my mother. What's more, and this you must keep to yourself, she and your grandfather were never married. He never married her because he never divorced his first wife – my real mother. You can work out what that makes my half-brothers and that's why we have to keep the skeleton locked in the cupboard. They don't know about it.'

Mystified by the casual way Rose was revealing family secrets to her, Jessie did her best to look and sound normal and to keep it going. 'So . . . your real mother couldn't have married again either.'

'No.' Rose lowered her eyes. 'I really don't want to say much more than that, Jessie. It's enough that you've brought things to the surface. I *shall* tell you about it, but not now. Not today. Let's keep today a happy one. It's Christmas Eve and it's your birthday.' She looked at Jessie pensively. 'We'll keep the lid on it for now. It's a sad can of worms, I'm afraid.' Pulling herself out of her mood, Rose brightened. 'I've got a present

for you which belonged to my mother. I was keeping it for your twenty-first when I thought I'd be ready to tell you everything about my past, but you may as well have it now. Now that you know.' Rose handed Jessie a small wrapped packet. 'It's a bit old-fashioned, so you don't *have* to wear it if you don't want to.' Wanting her daughter to open the present before Dolly or the boys came down, Rose urged her on, reminding Jessie that they had to make a start on the bird and plucking it in the back yard was out of the question. It had turned much colder in the night and the water barrel outside had a layer of ice on it. 'Look after it and keep it safe,' Rose went on. 'I'd like to think that you'll pass it on to your own daughter, one day.'

Untying the ribbon, Jessie slowly unwrapped the paper, savouring this time alone with her mother. She wasn't really expecting it to be anything more than something a bit special, but she was wrong. She could tell by the beautiful, small, red velvet box with domed lid that there was something really lovely inside.

Pushing open the lid with the tip of her thumb, she gazed at the delicate gold and pearl brooch. It wasn't a child's brooch, it was proper jewellery. For a second she thought her mother must have given her the wrong box.

'You clip it on to the collar or neckline of a dress,' Rose told her.

Touching the smooth reddish gold with the tip of her finger, Jessie couldn't find the right words to express herself. It was beautiful.

'My mother gave it to me when . . . when I was very young,' said Rose, casting her eyes down. 'She used to wear it all the time. That much I do remember. That and her sweet smell.' She drew a trembling breath and pushed back her shoulders. Composure was all-important to Rose. 'I've got something put by for Dolly as well. A locket. Apart from a ruby and diamond ring, those two pieces of jewellery were all my mother possessed.' Again, Jessie saw Rose summon her willpower as she quietly coughed

and swallowed the lump in her throat. 'She was more of a plain woman than a fancy one when it came to dressing herself.'

Sorry now that she had caused painful memories to surface, Jessie remained quiet. Rose had always lived according to her own Victorian upbringing – that children should keep no secrets – yet here she was, confiding one to her daughter.

'I don't really understand,' Jessie murmured at last, longing to know more.

'You will in time.' Rose locked her fingers together and straightened. 'Now that you know about Granny Blake you'll understand why she's never shown any of you affection. Although to give her her due, she treated me much the same as her sons, more or less. Your grandfather made up for it when he could. I believe he loved me more than he loved my half brothers, and he loved you, Jessie. He just wasn't very good at expressing himself.'

'He didn't have to show it. I knew.'

'Yes, I suppose you must have. You did spend a lot of time with him. I was pleased about that. It meant a lot to me.' Rose turned away then, saying, 'Maybe I'll be able to talk about my mother in years to come, Jess, but not yet . . . and not so soon after your grandfather passing away. So, wear the brooch for high days and holy days and put it somewhere safe the rest of the time.' She added, 'You'll find that life will start changing from now on. Take it as it comes and ask me whatever you have to. I can't promise to answer all of your questions but I'll be disappointed if you go to others for answers.'

Jessie thought of the photograph that had been with the certificate. 'What about the photo of grandfather and the babies in the pram? Who were they?'

'I don't know. I expect it came loose in the album.' Rose turned her face away, hiding her guilt. 'I don't recognise it.' Quickly she changed the subject to the day's work and told Jessie she was to make the porridge while she herself got on with other things. 'No doubt those boys'll be down any minute,' she

sighed, emptying her cup. 'I expect Dolly will sleep on until I drag her out of bed.'

Five minutes later she was busy with her chores, quieter than usual, but clearly the day would continue as normal, as if nothing had changed.

That night, before she turned off the gas mantle above her bed, Jessie wrote a few lines in her notebook: '24 December 1936 – Mum's told me a secret which I must keep from Dolly and the boys and it has to do with the mysterious marriage certificate. There are three million unemployed and we are very lucky that Dad has work. In November, Mum became the official owner of Grandfather's cobbler shop.'

It was a good Christmas, despite their recent bereavement. They all loved their presents and were allowed to stuff themselves full of chocolate, oranges and nuts, once they'd eaten their modest Christmas dinner. On 31 December, Jessie wrote in her diary: 'The most important things that happened this year were – on 20 January King George V died. On 10 December King Edward VIII abdicated from the throne. On 4 November William Ernest Gunter died.'

Very soon into the new year of 1937, the country saw a rise in trade and by the end of March Rose took on a cobbler full time. Jessie continued her employment in the offices of a soap factory in Hackney and Dolly started work as a waitress in a gentlemen's club, so small extra treats could be afforded.

The Warner family had been one of the luckier ones in the East End. Not only had Rose made a few pounds each week during the bad times but her husband, Robert, had always managed to get work in the docks, due to his size and hard-working nature. With so many unemployed, ordinary folk hadn't been able to afford to have their footwear soled and heeled but now that things were improving, Rose was considering selling new boots as well as repairing old ones. Spring brought a new feeling of hope to the working classes.

Sadly, though, the Jewish problem had rekindled and Fascist slogans were appearing on walls and hoardings again. No matter how many times the insulting remarks were scrubbed off the wall at the top of Jessie's turning, it did nothing to deter the culprits from slipping out after dark and re-chalking DOWN WITH THE JEWS!

Jessie, deep in thought, was trying to fathom the thinking behind it. The early evening May sunshine streamed in through the scullery window where she was sitting. She had also been remembering that dreadful day when she and the boys had walked innocently into the centre of the battle in Cable Street.

It wasn't just because Max, her boyfriend of two years, was Jewish that she was worried. Having seen the ugly mood of the anti-Facists as well as the menacing behaviour of Blackshirts, she was in fear of what might happen next. After Cable Street and all the publicity that followed, the Blackshirt movement had gone quiet, it was true, but during the past few months it had all started up again.

Shaking herself out of her sombre mood, Jessie got up and washed the pine table with soda water, cursing her sister Dolly for managing, yet again, to duck out of helping in the kitchen. Not that she wanted her around, with her endless chatter about Fred, her boyfriend. When she'd done the table, Jessie took off her apron and slipped into the parlour.

Dolly wasn't sewing the hem of her skirt as she had said but copying another poem from an ancient poetry book she'd found in a second-hand shop in Aldgate and which she would tell Fred she'd written herself – especially for him. She glanced up, her face full of innocence. She was wearing her best orange and black frock.

'If you think you're going to sneak out to see Fred, Dolly, you're out of luck.' Jessie glared at her sister.

Dolly turned a page of her book and sighed, as if she was sick of the sight of Jessie. Adding insult to injury, she then asked in her usual offhand way if she could borrow two shillings. 'It's

Friday, pay day, so I know you've got it, Jess. Fred's taking me to the pictures and paying for my seat but I need the bus fare there and back.'

Sometimes Dolly really did push her luck. The new frock she was wearing had cost her an entire week's wages and was one which Jessie had seen in the window of Pearls Fashions in Mile End Road and told Dolly about. Dolly knew full well that she'd set her heart on buying it and had got in first. That was Dolly.

'No, I won't lend you the money,' said Jessie. 'And what's more, you're not allowed to be by yourself with Fred till you're sixteen and that's nearly a year away.'

'If you tell on me,' said Dolly smugly, 'I'll tell on you. I saw what you were doing with Max on the doorstep last night. He had his hand up your skirt and you're not meant to be doing that, seventeen or not.'

'Your mouth needs to be washed with carbolic. Max isn't like your dirty boyfriends. He respects me.'

Closing her book with a snap, Dolly began to laugh. 'Miss High and Mighty. If you could only see yourself. Acting as if you're over twenty-one. You'll die a spinster, the way you go on. A stuffy, dried-up old maid.'

Hearing their parents coming down the stairs, Jessie bit her tongue. They were going to Hammersmith to visit some of Robert's family, the uppity Warners who had always believed that he had married beneath himself because Rose was a girl from the East End. Jessie was to look after the boys and see to it that Dolly didn't creep out. In truth she was glad that her sister was in a rebellious mood. She wanted her out of the house. Max was coming round.

Jessie leaned towards her sister and spoke in a quiet voice. 'I'm not lending you one penny.' She said this knowing full well that she would pay up, just to see the back of Dolly.

'Are you in there, girls?' Rose's voice drifted in from the passageway.

Dolly answered for them. 'Yes, Mum. I'm just about to do my sewing and Jessie's borrowing my poetry book for a read.' There was a sly smile on her face.

Popping her head round the door, Rose looked pleased. 'Good girls. See the boys go to bed at their proper time, Jessie, and you put away the dishes, Dolly. We'll be in later than usual. You can both stay up till ten o clock and listen to the wireless.'

'Thanks, Ma,' cooed Dolly, adding, 'If I clean all the windows inside and out tomorrow, would you treat me to half-a-crown? I thought I'd pop down to Riley's and buy some coconut ice, for all of us.'

'Take a shilling out of the lodgers' rent tin,' said Rose, straightening her hat, 'and learn a lesson from your reckless ways, spending all that money on a dress and leaving yourself with nothing. You should be ashamed of yourself. And don't think you'll get out of paying double keep next week, because you won't. You'll be just as hard up as you are now because you'll have your borrows to pay back as well. Bus fares to work and the like.' With that Rose disappeared and Robert looked round the door.

'If those boys play up you can send them to bed early, and no arguing, you two. I'll hear it from Alfie if a row breaks out.' He winked at his daughters and left.

Following him to the front door, Jessie asked her father if it would be all right for her to march with him the next day.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Well, I don't think anyone else's daughters'll be on the dockers' march, but then not many are like my Jessie, are they? I didn't think it would take long before you took an interest in politics. All right. You can come.'

When they'd gone, Jessie turned her thoughts to Max. Dolly had been lying when she said she'd seen them on the doorstep. It wasn't possible to see the front step from any of the windows. She'd guessed right though, Max had put his hand up her skirt

and not for the first time. Little did Dolly know that they'd gone much further than that.

'I heard you talking to Dad, Jessie. You needn't have crept to the front door to ask if you could go with him tomorrow. We all know you're his favourite and can wind him round your little finger. Dockers' march? What are you after then?'

'I'm not after anything. I feel like going on a march with lots of handsome dockers, that's all. Don't worry, I'll tell them I've got a young sister at home who can't wait for it.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Dolly tartly. 'Won't catch me with my knickers down.' She tilted her head to one side and recited, '"Jessie this and Jessie that and Jessie wouldn't pee on the new doormat." If Dad only knew what his beloved Jessie got up to with Max on the doorstep.'

'I don't s'pose for one minute that you've thought any more about our grandmother?' said Jessie, changing the subject which might have led to a scratching session. 'Our *real* grandmother. Because if you haven't, I think it's time you did.'

Dolly looked away, feigning interest in something she'd seen though the window. 'No, Jessie, I 'aven't. Mum's not bothered so why should I be? She's probably dead anyway.' She went back to her copying of other people's thoughts.

'You surprise me. Isn't history what you live and die for? Apart from boys.'

'My interest goes back one thousand seven hundred years, Jessie. You can keep this century and the one before it. I'm only—'

'Yeah, all right, Dolly. No lecture, thank you. As for our grandmother, you've known since February, your birthday, and you love the gold locket Mum gave you, which was *hers*. For all we know she might be living in poverty somewhere, all by herself, wondering if she's got any grandchildren, wondering what her own daughter looks like. She could be a lonely old—'

'Well, whoever she was and wherever she is, she can't be all that 'ard up – she had some nice jewellery so she must've

had a few bob. That brooch you collared must be worth something.'

'Three bits of jewellery aren't exactly the crown jewels. For all we know, what she's given us might 'ave been all of her precious belongings.'

Dolly raised her eyes to the ceiling and sighed theatrically. 'I see poor lonely old women every day. You only 'ave to walk down Whitechapel. There are plenty of war widows to take pity on if that's what you want to do with your time. You should join the Salvation Army, the uniform'd suit you.'

Refusing to rise to her sister's bait, Jessie satisfied herself with the fact that Dolly would soon be out of the house and the boys in bed. She had stopped off and bought them a comic each on the way home from work, the *Eagle* and the *Dandy*, which she'd promised they could read by gaslight, ensuring that she and Max would be undisturbed in the sitting room.

Pouring herself a glass of water, Jessie thought about the next day and the real reason for wanting to go on the dockers' march. She wanted to have some time alone with her dad. She would ask him if her real grandmother was still alive and where she was living. He had always listened to her in the past when she had other questions and he'd always answered as best he could – they were close, which made Dolly jealous. Not that Robert showed favour but Dolly loved to be the centre of attention and resented her sister getting some of it.

Jessie opened the tiny iron fire door to the copper boiler and checked to see if the fire needed stoking. The weekend hock of bacon in the simmering water, according to Rose's instructions, had to be taken out at eight o'clock. She was relieved to see that most of the coals were bright orange since the coal bucket was low and the last thing she wanted was to have to go into the dark, damp coal cupboard to fill it. The heat from the boiler didn't do much for her complexion; it was hot enough to redden her pale cheeks and once that happened no amount of face powder would

tone them down. She didn't want to look a sight when Max arrived.

She straightened, pushed the fire door shut with the tip of her shoe and went to the window, pressing one side of her face against the cool pane and then the other. Sudden loud banging on the front door startled her.

She hurried to open it. When she saw their neighbour, old Bob Jennings, on the doorstep Jessie knew instantly why he was there. His wife had been very ill, and Jessie guessed she had just passed away and the old man wanted Rose to lay her out. In Tanner Street, it was Rose Warner that people turned to when someone died.

Cap in hand, eyes red-rimmed and too distressed to speak, Bob's grief was all too evident. He and his wife had been married for sixty-two years.

'Mum's not in, Bob,' Jessie said gently.

'Oh,' was his choked reply, 'that's a pity. Do you know what time she'll be back?'

'About half past ten.' Jessie stood to one side and invited him into the passage but he raised a trembling hand.

'I must get back. She's on 'er own – not that she knows much about it.'

'Shall I tell Mum to come over once—'

'No,' he cut in. 'I dare say that'll be too late . . . I don't know. What do you think, Jessie? Should I try and get one of the other neighbours?'

She squeezed his arm affectionately, telling him that her parents were walking to Stepney Green station and if she ran she would get to the station before they went through the barrier. Slowly nodding, the old man pushed a hand deep into his trouser pocket and pulled out a shilling, telling her to get a cab. For him to offer her a shilling out of his meagre earnings as warehouse porter meant that it was Rose Warner he wanted to see to his wife, and no one else. Jessie assured him it wasn't necessary to take a cab and that she would be able to catch them up.

Rapidly telling Dolly to see Max into the sitting room when he arrived, Jessie rushed out of the house and hurried through the back streets of Stepney Green, taking every short cut and forcing herself to remember the times when Bob's wife had been full of life. The couple had no children of their own and had made up for it by keeping open house where the children of neighbours were concerned.

Before she fell ill, Mrs Jennings would take in washing each week and sometimes Jessie, as a child, would help out by putting it through the mangle and folding it before carrying neatly ironed piles along the street to the owners. For this she sometimes received sixpence. Sixpence, a mug of cocoa and a biscuit.

As she neared the station, Jessie saw her parents chatting to friends outside the barrier, obviously in no great hurry. Relieved that she'd caught them, she hurried towards them. It was Robert who saw her first and he guessed immediately that something was wrong. His smile dissolved. His first thoughts were for Dolly, Alfie and Stephen.

'It's Betty Jennings,' said Jessie quickly. 'Bob came over . . .'

Rose understood at once. 'Oh dear, I'd better get back.'

'Bob's waiting for you,' said Jessie. 'He's really upset. You go on. I'll catch my breath and follow.'

Robert kissed the top of her head. 'We'll wait while you pull yourself together.'

Jessie shook her head, telling him that she would rather stop there for a minute or two. 'Five minutes, that's all, Dad.' She wanted to be by herself. Leaning against the brick wall of Stepney Green station, she waited until they had gone before she shed a tear. Covering her face, she tried to block out the echoing sound of people talking and laughing in the entrance to the station. Not all of them were there to catch a train; it was a meeting place. Ben the bookie, a familiar figure, small and skinny, was taking bets as usual, eyes darting everywhere, on the look-out for the local bobby.

'You all right, love?' Jessie looked up to see a tall, good-looking man with lovely green eyes smiling at her. 'You ain't asleep, are you?'

'I'm catching my breath if you must know.' Embarrassed, she pulled her handkerchief from her sleeve and blotted her face.

'That's funny, 'cos I'm catching mine as well,' he chuckled.

'Why, is someone chasing you?'

'The law. Some bugger pinched my cap so I pinched someone else's.' He flicked the peak of his cap and winked. 'Best quality as well.'

'I could tell by your voice that you was a tea leaf.'

'And I could tell by your face that you'd have lovely blue eyes – once you opened 'em. Fancy a drink?' He nodded towards the pub on the corner.

'No thanks.' She stepped away, not really wanting to turn down the offer. She would have loved to have had the courage to say yes and go with him, but it didn't seem right.

'I'm sure I know you from somewhere.' He took her arm, as bold as brass. 'What school did you go to?'

Easing her arm away, Jessie asked him the same question. 'Which school did *you* go to?'

'Be fair,' he grinned, flirting with her. 'I asked first.'

'Please yourself,' she said, feigning boredom.

'Cephas Street,' he confessed, shrugging.

'I might have guessed.' He was obviously a show-off and probably from a rough family if the school he'd attended was anything to go by; just another tall, good-looking charmer, she thought, turning away.

'Tom! What are you doing here?' A woman in her sixties, nicely rounded with a friendly face, was hurrying towards them. 'You promised me you'd help your dad get the dinner ready!'

'Give me a break, Mum. I was just helping this young lady.' The tone of his voice had changed and now he was touching her with anxious concern.

The woman rolled her eyes and turned to Jessie, her

face relaxing into a warm smile. 'Not in any trouble, are you, love?'

'No. I've just had some sad news, that's all.'

'I can see you've been shedding a tear or two. All right now, are we?'

'Yes, thank you,' she said.

'Where d'yer work then?' Tom asked her.

'Hackney soap factory – in the offices,' she said, and turned to walk away. She reproached herself for telling him where she worked and then questioned her reason for doing it.

'The name's Tom. What do they call you?'

'Everything under the sun!' she called back, smiling to herself. There was something about Tom and his good-natured mother that seemed familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. She hadn't met either of them before and yet she felt as if she might know them.

Tom was thinking the very same thing as he walked home with his mother Emmie.

'You were a bit shy with that one, Tom. Was it my imagination or were you blushing?' she asked, watching his expression.

'Course I wasn't blushing, Mother. She seemed all right, though, bit of a snob but there you go.' Tom shrugged.

'So, my son, a knight in shining armour. Whatever next?'

'Talk sense. I cheered her up a bit, that's all, Anyway, mind your own business, nosy cow.'

Emmie quietly laughed at his cheek, but he was right, when it came to her three lads, she did want to know all the ins and outs.

'Nice girl, though,' murmured Tom. 'She reminded me of someone.'

'Oh yeah?' Emmie wasn't really interested; Tom fell in and out of love more times than he had hot dinners.

'Didn't remind you of anyone then?' he asked.

'No, Tom, I can't say she did.'

'Same colour hair, I s'pose.'

'As?'

'Hannah.'

'There must be hundreds of natural blondes living in the East End, son.'

'I know, I know, she just reminds me of her, that's all.'

'If only Hannah was part of a decent family, the way that young lady likely is. At least Hannah's got you to look out for her. She values your friendship more than you realise.'

'Friendship? What are you on about? She's more like a sister than a mate.'

'That's true. Oh dear,' Emmie paused for a rest, 'my poor old pins. I've been on my feet all day long, serving snooty customers in Wickham's and then seeing to those poor sods down the home. I think I'm gonna 'ave to give up my charity work, Tom.'

'Oh yeah? Pull the other leg. Anyway, about Hannah . . .'

'What about her?' said Emmie, putting her weight on his strong arm and resuming her slow pace.

Tom looked at his mother sideways. 'You should have adopted her years ago. I doubt that Gerta the German would have cared, there's no love lost between mother and daughter there.'

Emmie didn't want to get into this topic, she'd kept a tight secret for many years and idle chitchat wasn't going to catch her out. 'Lumbago's a terrible thing, you know,' she said, changing the subject. 'One of my old ladies has got it real bad. I hope to God that when I go it'll be a quick death, a good strong heart attack while I'm in my bed. Let's hope our Johnnie'll do what he promises and get to be a millionaire, then I can have private nurses looking after me.'

'Johnnie,' chuckled Tom, 'my elder brother the entrepreneur. Anyway, be no need to pay out for a private nurse, will there? Not if you go quick, in your sleep.'

Johnnie's latest venture was to sell threepenny coupons outside Millwall, West Ham and Arsenal football grounds.

Emmie's youngest, Stanley, was a different kettle of fish, regular as clockwork and never missed a day's work down at the bell foundry. Tom, content with his earnings from the docks and a little bit on the side from his perks, didn't have the same ambitions as Johnnie. He was a romantic, through and through. Emmie hoped that when he did finally settle down, he would stay in the East End – which, as far as she was concerned, wasn't a bad place to be. Besides which, she would miss him if he left.

They reached the turning where they lived. Emmie couldn't wait to get inside her house and put her feet up. 'I'm gasping for a cup of tea, Tom,' she said.

'So am I. Let's hope Hannah's still there, with the kettle on the stove.' Tom pushed his hand through the letter box and pulled at the key-on-a-string. He opened the door and followed Emmie inside.

'Hello,' smiled Hannah as they came into the kitchen. 'I was just about to give up on you, Tom, and go home. Charlie's gone down to the pub, Emmie, he got fed up waiting too. Your dinner's in the oven.'

'Fed up with waiting? Do me a favour, he's casseroled the lamb chops instead of frying 'em just so that he could go down the pub. It's dominoes night. Trust my husband not to miss that.' Dropping into a kitchen chair, Emmie kicked off her shoes, glancing sideways at Hannah's face – at her swollen eye. 'Who did that to you?'

'It's not as bad as it looks. One of the Reds slapped me with the back of his hand, outside the Blackshirts' club, and caught me with his ring. I slipped out early before my mother got on the platform to give *another* of her long and well-rehearsed talks.'

Emmie chucked gently. 'You've got to be more careful, Hannah. The chief librarian won't take kindly to you turning up for work looking like that. Don't forget, you're a public

servant in a respectable place, you have to look the part. I take it no one there knows that you're a Blackshirt?'

'Don't call me that, Emmie. You know why I go. If I refuse my mother will get into one of her spiteful moods.'

'You've got to learn to stand up to her, love. She's just a silly, ignorant woman. Your father going off didn't help matters, but there we are.'

There was a silence from Hannah which was to be expected. Emmie had criticised Hannah's dad, Jack, and that was a mistake. His memory was all that the girl had to cling on to. Jack and Gerta had planned to emigrate to New Zealand when Hannah was just a baby but for some unknown reason, Jack had gone alone leaving Gerta, a German, with Hannah. If Jack had taken her with him, Hannah would be out there living the good life instead of having to put up with Bethnal Green and three miserable rooms above a tobacconist's shop. But she was a survivor and had learned very early in life that it was better to be servile where Gerta was concerned. Maybe Jack would come back for her one day. It was Hannah's dream that he would, a dream that had kept her going. He had loved her more than life itself and he was the one who took her to the zoo and carried her on his shoulders to Bethnal Green gardens and to the fairgrounds. In his letters to her, Jack always made a point of writing about New Zealand and how healthier the life was there, but the worst of it was, Gerta cut his address out of the letters so that Hannah couldn't write back.

Tom looked at Hannah's face and frowned. 'I've told you before, Hannah, it's your own fault getting involved with that lot.'

'I don't want to talk about it,' she said dismissively. 'Oh, and by the way, my mother was expecting to see you this evening, Tom. She had another newspaper clipping to show you about her hero Mosley. Because you didn't come round she got at me. You shouldn't tell her something and then not do it.'

'That eye looks like a monkey's arse,' he said, which brought

a smile to both Hannah and Emmie's face. He handed his mother a cup of tea.

'She's determined to get you to join, Tom,' Hannah persisted.

'Over my dead body!' said Emmie. 'She'll have me to answer to soon if she goes on at him for much longer. You tell me, Hannah. You tell me if she does keep on at him, because as sure as I'm sitting here, he won't let on. I'll wring her skinny neck, so help me. A son of mine a Blackshirt? I don't think so! It's bad enough she's dragged *you* into it.' The Blackshirt movement was growing in the East End and Gerta Blake was an ardent member. She had forced poor Hannah to join up too, though Hannah had deep misgivings. Gerta, however, brooked no resistance.

'She's been trying to find a way to persuade Tom for years. She knows I warn him against it and that makes her angry.' There was a smile on the girl's face which gave Emmie hope: perhaps Hannah *was* beginning to fight back. 'Last week she managed to get him to herself in her room,' Hannah continued. 'Tom lit a cigarette just like I told him to. She hates the smell so she asked him to leave. My plan worked.' Her blue eyes could go from mournful to sparkling in a moment, swollen and bruised or not. She pushed her hand through her short curly blonde hair and laughed.

'If it hadn't, you would have eavesdropped and got caught,' said Tom, sipping his tea. He looked at Emmie. 'She's done that before. She gets me to leave the door ajar and raise my voice so she can hear what's going on but Gerta clocked it. Sharp as a razor.'

'Tom pretends to be deaf in one ear,' said Hannah. 'He used to do that at school when he was poking fun at the headmaster.'

'It's a wonder they didn't expel the little sod, he played truant enough times.' Emmie poured herself another cup of tea and listened to their banter. Hannah would be all right, she was

growing up at last. Seventeen and only just beginning to think for herself. Gerta had been worse than just strict with the girl, never allowing her to read fashion journals or listen to what she wanted on the wireless.

'Gerta's a character, Hannah, I'll say that for 'er.' Finishing his tea, Tom stood up. 'A very strange woman.'

'She believes she's won you over, Tom, that she's got you interested.'

'She *thinks* she's won me over – there's a difference. You know I can't be bothered with all that palaver. Your mother bores the bloody life out of me. Mosley this and Mosley that. The bloke's trying to be another Mussolini. I see it every day, down the docks, men with nothing in their lives so they start preaching. If it's not politics it's religion. Bore you to death and know they're doing it but does it stop 'em? Hitler's Gerta's hero, silly cow. She ain't got a clue. How old is she? Forty-two? Forty-three? Yet to listen to 'er you'd think she'd turned fifty. I bet she's not had a man since your dad ran off.'

'Don't be disgusting, Tom!' said Emmie. 'You're not down the docks now, thank you.'

'Sorry, Mum.' He stretched and announced that he was going to have a wash and shave before his dinner and then go down to the pub to have a pint with his dad. 'I might have a bath by the fire when I get back – if the water's hot in the copper. I've been running about all day, some bugger nicked my cap.'

'Well, how comes you were wearing one when we came home?' asked Emmie.

'That was someone's else's. That's why I've been running. Silly bastard would 'ave called a copper as well if he'd seen one, all over a cap. That's all I needed, a pocket full of easy-come fountain pens and I get pinched for nicking a cap. I can hear my mates laughing now.'

Emmie stopped herself from chastising him; he was nineteen, after all, and in any case it would have been a waste of time. Her

son had been stealing bits and bobs since he was six years old and no number of whippings had stopped him. 'I wonder what it's like in prison?' she murmured instead, trying a different tactic, hoping the thought of being locked up might at least make him think.

'I don't intend to find out. I'd jump on a ship to Australia if there was any danger of that.' He grinned and went into the scullery for his wash and brush up.

'My mother said something quite odd the other day.' Hannah had slipped into a reflective mood and sounded as if she was miles away. 'She asked me if Tom intended to marry me.'

'She did *what*?' laughed Tom. The scullery door opened and he stood grinning in the doorway, in his vest with his braces dangling. 'Whatever gave her that idea?'

'I don't dream about you either, Tom, but I don't find the idea that ridiculous.' Hannah couldn't help looking a little hurt at Tom's disbelief.

'But I'm your mate, Hannah! We've never been—'

'I'm not asking you to marry me! I'm just telling you what she said.'

'But we've never been like that together. She must have seen—'

'Oh, for God's sake! I only mentioned it because I thought she wanted to talk you into joining the party not the family,' Hannah said, exasperation in her voice.

'What did you tell her?'

'I said that I loved you but not in that way, and that you love me but not in that way.'

'Oh. So that's all right then.' He closed the door between them again.

'Fancy her asking a thing like that,' said Emmie, puzzled.

'She was in one of her tormenting moods, said that I would probably end up being a spinster in any case.'

'You should tell her that you've got dozens of men on the

end of string and that you plan to take 'em all back home, one at a time, to try 'em out. See what she makes of that.'

Hannah smiled. 'Maybe I will – one day. One thing's for certain, as much as I care about your daft son, I wouldn't want to be his wife.'

'Just as well!' called Tom, ''cos I think I might 'ave met the love of my life today. She wouldn't tell me her name but I know where she works.' There was the robust sound of splashing water from the scullery.

'Well, Tom,' Hannah called back, 'that's the first time I've heard you mention a girl without using an expletive to describe her qualities.'

'Cheeky cow! She reminded me of you, funnily enough. Don't know why. Same white wavy hair, that's all. Longer than yours, though. She's a bit of a toffee nose as well. Nice though, I liked her. Could be love at first sight.'

'Again?' said Emmie, stopping him before he got too carried away. 'I'm ready for my dinner and bed. It don't look like Tom's stopping in to play cards, Hannah love. Will you be going to the pub with him?'

'No. My eye's beginning to throb again. I'm not in the mood for cards anyway. I'll call round tomorrow after the dockers' march – it is tomorrow, isn't it, when Tom's marching?'

'I think so, child, yes. Try and keep away from the Blackshirts, there's a good girl. That eye'll get worse before it gets better.'

'The club's running down in any case, the numbers have steadily been falling. Only the strong Fascists are still members now, and those who've started romances and use the club to meet up, without wives and husbands realising what actually goes on there.'

'Yeah, but all it takes is just one well-planned speech from Mosely to get them all going again,' said Emmie, concerned. 'It's been quiet for a while so you can bet your life something's on the boil somewhere.'

Returning to the room, Tom put an arm round his mother's shoulders. 'Couldn't lend me five bob, could you, Mum?' He'd lost at cards again.

'Playing in your lunch break at the docks again,' grouched Emmie, reaching for her purse. 'You'll never learn, will you? And I want it back! You get away with blue murder.'

'Well, you will keep opening your purse, Emmie,' said Hannah. 'I'll see you tomorrow evening,' she added as she left.

'I put some money on a greyhound, Mum – a tip and a dead cert. I wanted to buy that new hat you've been going on about.'

'The trouble with you, Tom, is that you spend money before you've got it in your pocket. You'll end up in the debtor prison if you're not careful.'

'And you can fetch in a cake and a file. You'd love that, you know you would.'

'It's not funny, you've got to start acting more responsible, Tom.'

'I was unlucky, Mother, that's all. It should 'ave won!' Tom leaned forward and towel rubbed his hair.

'What's tomorrow's dockers' march in aid of this time?' asked Emmie, pleased that he was at least accountable when it came to the union.

'More money, less hours, better conditions.' With that he went upstairs to put on a clean shirt and tie, leaving Emmie to think about what Gerta had said, about him marrying Hannah. What would happen when Tom did meet the right girl? How would Hannah fit into that little scene? The two of them had been as thick as thieves since they were very young.

Opening the door leading to the flat above the shop, Hannah did her utmost to be quiet. She had almost managed to creep past the door of Gerta's sitting room when she heard her moving about. Hoping her mother wasn't going to appear, Hannah tiptoed towards her bedroom. There was the sound

of the doorknob slowly turning and then the telltale creaking of the door.

'Why must you creep about like a *fluchtling*! If I don't hear you come in, I smell you.' Gerta was standing in the doorway scowling at her.

'I wasn't creeping, I was going quietly, in case you were having a nap.'

Gerta narrowed her eyes. 'You went out looking like this? You didn't cover that eye? It isn't something to look at. Do you feel proud of it? Is that the reason? You want people to stop and ask what happened?' Her heavily accented voice was shrill and cross.

'The patch made it feel worse. I thought it best to let the air get to it and anyway I was only going round to play cards with Tom and I knew he wouldn't mind seeing me looking like this.'

'Tom? But he was supposed to be coming here, to see me.'

'He forgot.'

'Ha! *Ich glaube nicht.*' Gerta moved closer to Hannah and examined the eye. 'You said you were going to the market.'

'I changed my mind.' She tried to look forcefully at her mother and hide her longing to get to her room.

'Was that after or before you left the flat? Because if it was before, you lied to me then, and if it was after, you are lying now.'

'I had the pad on when I went out. It irritated so I took it off and then decided to go to Tom's instead.'

'You think I don't see through your lies?' sneered Gerta, her face too close for comfort. 'Why would you want him to see that ugly eye? He is a man. Doesn't it bother you? At your age I did something special with my hair. If I had been cursed with white hair I would have coloured it by now, and if my face looked like that, I would choose not to be seen by a man.' She leaned to one side and studied Hannah's blushing face. 'I don't recall you having a crush on a boy. Isn't that a little odd? You don't like men – is that it?'

'My eye's throbbing,' murmured Hannah. 'I'm going to have a wash and lie down.'

'*Wasche?* Ha! You spend time in there just *looking* at yourself. Or are you in the wash room scrubbing your body over and over? Because if that is so, let me remind you that it is God who may cleanse the soul. Soap and water will not do his work.'

Hannah knew that her mother was a bitter and twisted woman but she still couldn't brush off her spitefulness. All her self-doubts, ironed out by Tom or Emmie, returned within minutes of being back in her company. A few selected words from Gerta and Hannah withdrew, back into her shell.

'I don't feel hungry this evening so I won't have any supper. After my wash I'll go to bed and—'

'Haven't you forgotten something? Or do you want free food now as well as free service?'

'I haven't opened my pay packet yet,' said Hannah, her voice quivering. 'I've never once missed giving you my keep.'

'There is always a first time. I would like to think I could trust you but you have already turned into a liar. Cheating people is never far behind.'

Taking her pay packet from her handbag, Hannah opened the small manila envelope and withdrew a pound note. Hiding her contempt, she placed the money on the side table in the hallway.

'You can ill afford to pull faces, Hannah,' snapped Gerta, sweeping up the note. 'There is cold pork and red cabbage in the kitchen. Cucumber salad is in a side dish. If you don't eat it this evening it will save me bothering tomorrow.'

In her bedroom, Hannah vowed that soon she would find herself somewhere else to live, far away from her mother. Feeling very much alone, she switched on the bedside lamp, sat on the small wooden chair and tried to imagine herself in different surroundings, anywhere but in this silent, lonely room.

Chapter Two

On Sunday morning, to the sound of the church bells in the background, Jessie was enjoying her favourite hobby, helping out in the back yard, or garden as her dad preferred to call it. Leaving him to prune the climbing rose on the back wall, she snipped at the dead tulips and placed them in her basket. Her thoughts were on the handsome Tom whom she had met once again on the dockers' march. Worried that she had agreed to go on a date with him, she toyed with the idea of asking Max if he would mind. She had surprised herself by agreeing so readily to meet up with Tom but more surprising was her reaction at seeing him again – she had, without a shred of doubt, been more than pleased. Seeing him the very next day after their first meeting was certainly an odd coincidence, but even more strange was that she felt as if she had known him for a while – and from the way they had chatted, anyone could have been forgiven for thinking the same. Tom was the exact opposite of Max who was the quiet, serious type with a more gentle humour.

'I think we'll have a lovely show of roses this year, Jess,' said Robert, cutting through her thoughts.

'We always do, Dad. I've missed the tulips again. I wanted to press the petals but they've had it – all limp and falling apart.'

'Never mind, wait for the roses to come out in summer

and press those instead. So,' Robert wiped the sweat from his brow, 'what did you think of yesterday, Jessie? Your first dockers' march.'

'It was good, and I wasn't the only female there, was I? Some of the wives came out, and in good voice. I liked Tom. He seemed nice.'

'He's all right. Pass me that sack, Jess. I'll put the cuttings in there for now, till they've dried out, then we can have a small bonfire.'

Handing him the damp sack, Jessie probed a little further. 'You don't know much about him then?'

'Tom? No. But if first impressions are anything to go by, he's ... like I said, all right. But I wouldn't set my sights on him, Jess, he's not the settling down kind. If he was a sailor he'd have a girl in every port, I reckon.'

'It won't hurt to go out with him just the once, though, will it? You don't think Max would be upset if he found out?'

Robert drew breath and raised an eyebrow. 'I wouldn't like it if your mother had done that to me, but as you say, it will only be the once and you say it's a foursome so it can't do no harm. But best you don't mention it to Max for now.'

'I'll tell him afterwards – once a few weeks have gone by.' Jessie smiled broadly which did not go unnoticed by Robert. 'It's funny really,' she said, 'my meeting him a second time like that, within twenty-four hours. Does he work in your wharf?'

'He goes from one to another. Tall, strong lads like Tom will always get work.' Robert looked at his daughter sideways as he worked. 'How is Max these days? Haven't seen him to talk to for a while. Not going off the boil, is it?'

'Course not. He's worried about the Blackshirts though, spends more time at the Jewish Club, at meetings, discussing the troubles and that.' Jessie paused and then said lightly, 'So, you think that Tom's a bit of a wide boy then?'

'I never said that. He's a bit free-spirited, that's all.' Lighting his pipe, Robert went back to examine his climbing rose. 'I think

that'll do for now. I don't know about you, Jess, but I'm ready for a nice cup of tea. Come on, we'll take a break.'

Following him in through the back door, she said, 'So you think it's all right, if I go on the foursome?'

'It's up to you, Jessie. I'm not going to interfere one way or another, you're old enough to make up your own mind. Just don't go two-timing Max, that's all I'm saying.'

He was right, thought Jessie, but then she had no intention of two-timing Max. She fancied a bit of fun, that was all, and Max at best wasn't full of joy. She loved him, or at least she supposed she did. Why else had they been courting for two years or so? And it wasn't surprising he was a bit serious these days, with the anti-Jewish undercurrents that were all around and seemed to be swelling. 'You won't say anything to Mum, will you?' she added as they arrived in the kitchen.

'Not until a few weeks have gone by,' he chuckled, echoing what she had said. 'Now let that be the end of it.'

Pleased that her dad had, in his own way, given her the thumbs up, Jessie felt more settled about it. She knew she could rely on him to make her feel right about things, he always did. She couldn't imagine life without him. She loved Rose just as much but they weren't as close as she and her dad were – and, on the other hand, there had been times when she envied the way Dolly and her mother chatted together, so that evened things up.

Washing her hands under the cold tap, Jessie found herself thinking about Tom again, wondering if he would behave himself when they were in the picture palace. Being a foursome made it feel less like a proper date and for that she admired Tom for suggesting it. Maybe he was just as shy about going out with her as she was with him? Perhaps he'd heard she was already courting. She remembered the way he and his mother, Emmie, got on so naturally and warmed to them both.

Once Emmie had seen her husband Charlie off to Brick Lane

that same Sunday morning, she enjoyed a quiet cup of tea by herself. Charlie wouldn't be back for hours. After he'd spent time rummaging through boxes of spare bits for his old crystal set collection, he would go on to Petticoat Lane where he'd meet up with his fellow wireless enthusiasts in their favourite pub. She wouldn't see him until three in the afternoon when he would want his Sunday roast, and that suited her fine. Emmie was ready for her favourite pastime – baking tarts and cakes for the week. She looked at the four wirelesses sitting on the sideboard and hoped Charlie wouldn't come back with more clutter.

Tom, still dreamy from his chance meeting with Jessie the day before on the dockers' march, drifted into the kitchen and sat down. Emmie listened as he poured out his heart for ten long minutes. He was in love again and waiting for her to say, 'Bring her home then, son' – though his brothers and dad would crucify him in front of the girl if he didn't leave a gap between her and his last girlfriend. Emmie had counted seven loves of his life so far this year and the month of May wasn't out yet. God help me through June, she thought, with its silvery moon.

She finished her tea, took her rolling pin from the drawer and went to work on the pastry she'd prepared for a steak and kidney for the next day's dinner. With her husband working in the fruit market and her three sons in full-time employment, the neighbours believed she was rich. She had always wanted strapping sons who would take after their father and that's what she'd got, but strapping sons have big appetites and hers ate her out of house and home. Tom continued to bend her ear, as she worked and she kept one ear open to his chatter.

'It's different this time, Mum. I've never met anyone like her.' Sitting in his father's old Lincolnshire chair, he reminded her of Charlie when she was first married to him. He and Tom were like two peas in a pod. 'She does work in the offices of the soap factory like she said, and as luck would have it, so does Ron's new girlfriend Sally. She knows Jess and likes her.'

Ron, Tom's best mate, was just as bad, in and out of love

all the time. 'I thought he was gonna marry the last one,' Emmie said innocently, having a dig at both lads.

'Changed his mind – just in the nick of time. She wasn't all the ticket,' Tom said firmly.

'Couldn't have been if she thought she could tie Ron [illegible]'

'Jessie lives over Stepney Green, in one of the nice streets. Her old man's a crane driver – East India Docks. Probably earns twice as much as Dad. Nice bloke though, from an educated family over in Hammersmith. He reckons he's the black sheep.'

'Didn't take you long to find out the family history, did it? You might've done better chatting up the girl instead of her dad. What was she doing while the pair of you was chewing the fat?'

'Walking next to us, all quiet and thoughtful. I couldn't believe my luck when I saw 'er. I meet 'er by chance on Friday and then the next day she appears out of the blue in a bloody dockers' march, of all things. I was straight in, talking to her old man, putting my best foot forward.'

'How old is she?'

'Dunno. Seventeen, eighteen. What difference does it make?' He was challenging his mother to criticise this newfound angel of his. 'She is a cracker, though, ain't she? A natural blonde with lovely blue eyes.' His gaze was unfocused as he indulged his fantasy. Emmie had seen it all before. 'And she's clever with it ... Works in the manager's office ...'

'What's her father's name?' She wasn't really interested, concentrating more on rolling out her pastry. 'I might know the family.'

'Robert Warner. You won't know him. I told you, he's from Hammersmith way and if Jessie's anything to go by, her mother'll be from somewhere nice as well. Christ knows what they're doing in the East End.' His head still in the clouds, he didn't notice his mother's reaction to what he'd just said.

Emmie was stunned. She pulled up her kitchen chair and sat down heavily, dusting off her hands. Of all the girls that he could have met up with, it had to be Jessie Warner. There weren't many miles between Bethnal Green and Stepney Green, but it hadn't crossed her mind that their paths would cross and neither had it occurred to her that the girl at Stepney Green station could be the baby she had once held in her arms. It might have been funny if it didn't spell trouble.

Emmie took a deep breath and said sharply, 'Pretty blondes are ten a penny and you've hardly spoken two words to the girl.' Abruptly she stood up and poked the hot coals of the cooking range. 'Anyway, enough of this. I've the beds to make.'

'The beds? You're in the middle of making a pie!' Tom looked at her in surprise.

'I can finish it later. I think I might have one of my headaches coming on, I might lie down for a bit to save it getting worse. Cover everything with a clean tea towel for me, there's a good lad.' She wanted to be by herself. There was some serious thinking to do. She would have to be very careful how she handled this new situation. Very careful indeed. 'Did you arrange to see this blonde of yours again then?' she asked, dreading the answer.

'Yep. In a foursome. We're going to the pictures next week – that's if she turns up.'

Let's hope she doesn't, son, thought Emmie, let's hope she doesn't turn up.

Up in her bedroom she weighed up the pros and cons of paying Rose Warner a visit and then cursed Tom for spoiling her Sunday. She would now have to break their unspoken rule of years gone by and meet up with her old friend.

The following morning, after a restless night tossing and turning, Emmie decided that she would not put off until tomorrow what could be done today. Tom had, without knowing it, brought chickens home to roost.

When she had fed and seen the men off to work, Emmie

dressed in her pink and green flower-patterned frock with matching bolero and her favourite straw hat and left the house to visit her old friend, Rose Warner. Making a note to give her doorstep a going-over with red cardinal polish and her windows and paintwork a good spring clean, she closed the door behind her and enjoyed the May sunshine on her face.

Walking along by Charrington's brewery, she thought back to the days when she was employed there as a bottle filler. The smell of beer brought back those heady days when she and the other women had larks with the lads, way back, before the last war. Blushing at the thought of it, she nodded and showed a hand to the chaps in the loading bay and remembered Charlie as a young man, when he worked there.

Emmie and Rose went back a very long way and their parents had also been good friends in the past. If she was honest with herself, Emmie would have been the first to admit that she would much rather turn round and go home, but Rose had suffered terribly in the past and if she could save her from more heartache now, she would.

'You're as pretty as a picture today, Emmie,' Jim of Jim's Bird Cage Shop called from his shop doorway. 'Where you off to?' The man had always made her smile; short and skinny, always chirpy, he reminded her of the birds he sold. Just as well he couldn't sing like a canary, she thought, because if he could, he would have, right there and then.

'I'm making the most of the May sunshine, Jim, and with a bit of luck I'll manage to persuade a friend of mine out of her cobbler shop for five minutes. I fancy an afternoon cuppa in the tea rooms.'

'Well, ducks, if she's too busy, you can always take me!' Jim laughed heartily, still managing to keep his tiny, hand-rolled cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. 'What d'yer think of my new sign then? Painted that m'self.'

Emmie drew back and read aloud, '"Budgies boarded during your holidays." You've always boarded birds, Jim, 'aven't

you?' She tried to get round having to pass comment on his sign-writing which was, to say the least, uneven. 'It's a bit early in the year – no one I know goes away till midsummer or hop-picking time.'

'Well, I thought a nice brightly painted sign would cheer people up. I found an old tin of yellow paint and mixed it with a bit of red. Work of art that.' He gazed at it with an air of satisfaction, puffing on his cigarette

'Well, it's bright, I'll give you that.' Emmie grinned at him.

'What about a nice yellow canary then, in a golden cage?' He waved a hand at the various cages hanging outside his shop. 'I could let you have that little brass one cheap. Look at the way it's gleaming in the sun. Just polished it. I'll throw the bird in for threepence, seeing as it's you.'

Once a tout always a tout, thought Emmie. From the time Jim could walk he had worked alongside his father selling his fine feathered friends, as he called them. Formerly the proud owner of a battered stall in Club Row, Bethnal Green, he was now his own boss with a successful little business, hardly a rich man but certainly better off than when his arse hung out of his trousers.

'I daren't, Jim. I would love that little cage and I would love my very own bird.'

'I'll 'ave a word with your Charlie when *he* next passes, tell him how you've been yearning after that little cage. A canary, was it?'

Laughing at him, Emmie wished him the best of luck and went on her way. Monday was her day off from Wickham's department store and usually the day when she would catch up on everything: washing, ironing, the lot. Not this Monday, though. This Monday she had other more important things to think about. Tom, with his good looks and an eye for a pretty girl, was more trouble than he could imagine.

Turning into Hayfields Passage, Stepney Green, Emmie

imagined herself in bygone days living in one of the grand Georgian houses which surrounded the old village green. Cherry trees, now in full bloom, surrounded the square where she and Charlie had gone one night when they'd had a few too many – before they were married. She liked to think that that was where her eldest son, Johnnie, was conceived. Under the cherry blossom trees.

Not many people could afford the luxury of living in these towering houses now, and those who could had moved on to pastures new. What a shame, thought Emmie, that it stopped being fashionable for the well-to-do to live in Stepney Green. When she was a nipper, running around in bare feet in the 1890s, she'd often helped her dad deliver flowers from Covent Garden to the very house she stood in front of now. She had loved sitting up on the cart beside him, sipping hot tea from a tin flask while he drove the old carthorses.

Pausing below the marble steps leading up to the oak and glass-panelled door of the Craft School, an elegant Queen Anne terraced mansion, she remembered the days when she would go in there with her dad. They had never been further than the entrance hall, but that had been enough. At that time, a very grand family lived there, with housemaids, a butler, and a cook-in-charge, a rounded woman with a permanent smile who wore a big white apron. Emmie remembered her well. She also remembered the freshly baked buns and biscuits the cook had pressed into her hands while her dad brought in the blooms.

How proud she and others in that neck of the woods had felt, having the gentry as neighbours. Sighing, she allowed herself an impossible dream – there but for fortune go you, me and the boys, Charlie. And a suite for Hannah.

At the Broadway, Emmie pushed open the familiar door to Rose's cobbler shop. She was pleased to see that Rose was there, placing small tins of black shoe polish on a shelf.

'Stuck in 'ere on a lovely spring day, Rose?'

The look of surprised delight on her friend's face as she

turned round was a tonic. 'Emmie Smith! Well, well, well. My goodness.' Rose shook her head, beaming. 'This is a surprise! You look so well, Emmie. Flourishing like the blossom.'

'You're looking well yourself, Rose. You 'aven't aged a day.' Emmie smiled affectionately.

'Come on out to the back. Cobbler George'll look after the shop for me.'

The old man, tapping nails into the sole of a boot in the corner of the shop, nodded and smiled. 'If you're putting the kettle on, Rose . . .'

The women made their way through to the back quietly laughing. Stepping carefully around piles of shoes, some waiting for repair and others ready for customers, Emmie nodded to the apprentice lad who was giving a pair of shoes a spit and polish. To one side of him was a neat row of boots and shoes he had already shone and to the other a pile awaiting attention. He looked tired, bored and gloomy.

'You won't be sorry, son,' said Emmie. 'It's a good trade to be in and what you're doing is all part of your training. You'll soon be elbowing Cobbler George out the way.'

'Right an' all,' said the old boy, chucking. 'Right an' all.' The fourteen-year-old apprentice didn't look so sure about it.

As they went into the little room at the back, Emmie said, 'Oh, I do love the smell of freshly cut leather and shoe polish, Rose. You've got plenty of work, by the look of things.'

'Sign of the times, Emmie. A bit more work for everyone, thank goodness. Let's hope it lasts right up and into the forties.' A familiar faraway look that Emmie had once teased her about swept across Rose's face. 'Let's just thank our blessings and not fear tomorrow. None of us knows what lies in store, do we? The shoes and boots that are coming through now are fit for repair but a year or so ago we were lucky if there was any heel or sole left on them to be mended. We did our best but the work took twice as long and we couldn't charge a penny more. But there, I suppose you had your fair share of having to make

ends meet.' Rose filled the kettle as Emmie sat down at the scrubbed wood table.

'It wasn't a bed of flowers, no. But all my men are in work now so I mustn't grumble. I expect you're wondering why I've turned up like this, out of the blue?'

Rose lit the gas ring beneath the kettle. 'It's lovely to see you, that much I do know. You should pop in more often when you're out shopping. I expect you usually go down the Bethnal Green market but you must wander up here to the Broadway sometimes.'

'I don't, to be truthful. Don't have the time. It's a good twenty-minute walk from my place to your shop. Anyway I'm here now and I'm pleased to see you looking so well.'

Rose eased the lid off a biscuit tin. 'You're a sight for sore eyes, I must say. I was ready for a break and it's lovely to share it with you.'

'You couldn't swing a bloody cat in here, Rose,' said Emmie, looking around, 'now you've put a bit of furniture in. It must be lovely to have a little back room like this. You can shut yourself away for ten minutes. We all need to escape sometimes, don't we?'

'It does get hectic, I must admit. I sometimes wonder if I'm coming or going.' Rose looked through the doorway to check that the shop hadn't filled and then closed the door. She was genuinely pleased to see Emmie and it showed. The difference in their ages hadn't mattered all those years back and it didn't matter now that she was in her forties and Emmie in her fifties.

While she piled a plate with biscuits, the kettle boiled and Rose filled the pot, set out the cups and sat down opposite her friend. 'How are those sons of yours, Emmie? Still hanging on to your apron strings?'

'That they are, all three of the bleeders.'

'You've always mollycoddled them, don't deny it,' Rose chuckled quietly and poured out the tea. 'No wonder they're in no hurry to go.'

'What about your two lads and those girls of yours, Jessie and Dolly?'

'Much the same as ever,' said Rose, passing Emmie a cup of tea. 'Alfie's still a naughty boy, Stephen's as soft as ever, Dolly as lazy and for ever going on about the early days of London, and Jessie – well, she's turning into a very inquisitive young lady. Always questioning things. Questions, questions, questions.'

'And some you can't answer?'

'Some I'm not ready to answer. We never did need to say much to each other to get our message across, did we?'

'Which is how it should be. Who are Jessie's questions to do with?'

Rose shrugged, sipped her tea and then shrugged again. 'My mother. I don't want to have to think about all of that.'

'No, I don't expect you do. Jessie obviously takes after you. At her age and before it, you was full of bloody questions as well.'

'Was I? I can't say I remember.' A glazed expression crossed Rose's face. 'Jessie was very fond of her grandfather, and very upset when he died. She went through his things soon afterwards, looking for a keepsake. Found his marriage certificate, of all things. She'd hidden it well but I found it in the air vent in her bedroom. So I had to tell her that Grandmother Blake wasn't my real mother.'

'Perhaps it was for the best. Maybe you should have told your children before now, all of them. Keeping secrets for too long can cause a lot of problems – the webs we weave and all of that?'

'Maybe. I've told Dolly too now, about Grandmother Blake, nothing else, and she doesn't seem bothered. But like I say, my Jessie's the prying type, has to know everything. She'll want to find my mother next. She may well be led to an unmarked grave.'

'Now then, Rose, that's not like you. Your mother can't be

much more than seventy and that's no age. I take it you couldn't be persuaded to find out more about her?'

'No. As far as I'm concerned, she's gone from my life.' Rose's face showed no sign of emotion as she looked directly at her old friend. 'How's Charlie these days? Got plenty of work?'

Rose clearly wanted to change the subject, but, impatient to get to the point, Emmie answered in a tone to end that line of conversation. 'Charlie's all right. Still only a porter down Covent Garden but he's well known there and well liked. Earns an extra bob here and there.' Then, taking a deep breath and blowing caution to the wind, Emmie got to the heart of the matter. 'Rose, I'm afraid that something's cropped up, right out of the blue. I think we've got a little problem and to tell you the truth I don't know which way to go about solving it.'

'By "we" I take it you mean *us* – not you and Charlie.' Rose looked wary.

'I do. I suppose you guessed something was up the minute I walked in your shop.'

'Your face gives you away, Emmie. Out with it then. What have you got to tell me?'

'It's to do with Hannah.'

'I thought as much. Go on.' Rose was expressionless but she sat extremely still.

'My Tom's still as thick as thieves with her – mates though, not sweethearts.'

'She's gone away to New Zealand, hasn't she? That's what you've come to tell me.'

'No, Rose, she's still here, in Bethnal Green, and she's all right, all things considered. It's just that my Tom and your Jessie have—'

Rose cut her off with a laugh of disbelief. 'Your *Tom*? My *Jessie*? Don't be so daft, Emmie. Jessie's courting Max Cohen, Leo and Ginny's son from the shop next door. They plan to be engaged. Jessie doesn't even know Tom. She's hardly ever over your way and when she does go out it's usually with Max

or . . .' Pressing her fingers against her lips, Rose closed her eyes. 'Please, Emmie, please don't tell me that she and Hannah have met up.'

'Pull yourself together, Rose! I didn't say that. Now for goodness' sake just listen to what I've got to say.' Emmie put her cup down forcefully.

'I'm sorry, Emmie, but deep down inside it's something I've always dreaded.'

'Jessie and *Tom* have met up. Don't ask me how it could have happened, it just has and he's walking around like a lovesick puppy.'

'Does he know?' Rose leaned forward anxiously.

'Not yet. But I'll have to tell him if he mentions her again, before things go too far and he wants to fetch Jessie home to show her off to his brothers. He's a good boy and he'll listen to me. I'll ask him not to see her and I shall tell him to keep it to himself. There's no risk of him telling Hannah, he's not like that. He'll be sworn to secrecy – as I've had to be all these years.'

A deep sigh escaped from Rose. 'Oh dear. Well, you have shaken me, Emmie. And there I was this morning, thinking how things were on the up. There's nothing to say that he won't go against your wishes. You know what they're like, young people these days. Tell them not to do something and they'll be all the more determined.'

'If I can't sway him, no one can. He can be a bit self-centred at times and there's not much I can do about that. We can't get inside our children, can we? We can't make them do what we think is right. We've got to let them make their mistakes and—'

'But this is too *serious*, Emmie. You mustn't allow him to make a mistake; but there, he'll see that, once you've told him, of course he will. At least I should hope so. Mind you, he used to be a little sod if my memory serves me right. Caused you to have sleepless nights many a time.'

'High-spirited, that's all.'

'Well, that's one way of putting it, I suppose.'

Emmie bristled. 'That's quite enough of that, Rose! Don't come the high and mighty, not with me. I know your beginnings, don't forget, and to give my son his due, he's no pansy. He has strong opinions about some things and I can't say that doesn't please me.' Emmie drew breath; this wasn't the way she wanted it to go. Softening her voice, she leaned closer to her friend. 'Neither of us'll come out in a very good light over this, Rose. He'll say we should have told Hannah much earlier on, and he'll have a point, but there, what's done is done, we have to think of a way round it.'

'He could cause so much trouble by meddling and not realise until it's too late.' Rose pursed her lips and shook her head. 'If you can't put a stop to Tom seeing Jessie then I shall have to do something. I'll find a way, even if I have to lie to her, say that I've heard things about Tom which aren't nice.'

'Well, you must do as you think best.' Emmie was disappointed. She had never thought that she would let someone threaten to defile her son's good name, especially not her old friend Rose Warner.

'Yes,' Rose went on, as if she was barely aware of Emmie's presence 'that's what I shall do. Tom won't know so it can't hurt him. There's no saying it'll work, Jessie has a mind of her own too, but we've got to try and put a stop to it now, before it gets out of hand.'

Straightening her hat, Emmie stood up. 'If I don't go now I'm afraid this will break into a row, Rose, and I don't want that. I don't think you're being very fair on my son, none of this is his fault.'

'Well, it's not mine, Emmie, and I'm sure my Jessie hasn't got thoughts on your Tom. Like I say, she's—'

'Courting Max Cohen,' Emmie finished angrily. 'Be warned, Rose, if we do try and keep our children apart, it might well have the opposite effect. Young people stand up for their rights more these days.'

'*Your* children might, Emmie, but mine wouldn't dare. I've brought Jessie up differently from that.'

'I wouldn't be so sure of yourself if I were you. You're living a cosy life now, and good luck to you, I say, but don't ever suppose that things'll drift on without trouble. Anything can happen to any one of us, at any time. Anyway, enough of all that. Once you've had time to take in what I've told you, you might want to hear what Hannah's been going through with that German bitch, Gerta. What she's still going through. The poor child's never had any friends except for Tom. The only children who were let into Gerta's home to play with Hannah came with their parents, Fascist party members or the like.' Emmie was deliberately laying it on, hoping to weaken her friend and touch the soft spot she remembered so well. 'Tom managed to cross Gerta's barrier,' she continued, 'but only because she sees him as useful, a potential Blackshirt, a steward.'

'Time's running on, Emmie,' said Rose, rising. 'I've a lot of work on. A great deal to do.' She locked her fingers. She was struggling to keep her composure. She didn't want to hear what a terrible time Hannah had had, and she certainly didn't want the word Blackshirt spoken in her shop. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing she could do now with regard to Hannah to make amends, it was too late for all of that, but Emmie was not easily stopped.

'Tom and I often laugh at Gerta. Whenever her hero, Mosley, is in Bethnal Green, Stepney or Shoreditch, she'll be there at the front, applauding him.'

'Well, let's hope that Tom and Hannah's friendship continues,' said Rose. 'We don't want to ruin something like that over a silly five-minute romance, do we?'

'Hannah and Tom's friendship is important, I'll grant you,' said Emmie, tight-lipped. 'He thinks the world of her.' She smiled at her friend once more and lowered her voice. 'She's turned out lovely, Rose. You can be very proud—'

The crockery jumped as Rose slammed her fist onto the

table. 'I have just *two* daughters, not three! Jessie and Dolly! And that's all! I *won't* have you stirring up the past. How could you, Emmie? Coming here and telling me all this. Just tell your son to keep away from my Jessie! Tell him she's promised to another man.' Rose took a deep breath to compose herself and then quietly asked Emmie to leave. 'Close the door behind you, there's a good friend. I need time in here on my own.'

'Drop me a line if you want,' said Emmie, choked. 'No one else will see the letter. I'll burn it once I've read it. You know my address.' With her head high, she walked through the shop, hoping this wouldn't be the last time.

She smiled at the young apprentice and then at Cobbler George in the corner, wondering if they had heard the heated conversation. She paused inside the shop door and was weighing up whether to go back and comfort Rose when a sudden rumpus outside startled her.

'Stinking Jews. Yids!' The sound of breaking glass followed.

Emmie shuddered. A lad no older than one of her own had thrown a brick through the grocery shop window next door. She threw open Rose's shop door and went outside, ready to give someone the sharp end of her tongue. She was pulled up short by the sight of Mr and Mrs Cohen standing helpless as one of the hooligans gripped the end of their egg stall and heaved it up, tipping the whole thing over and sending hundreds of eggs smashing to the ground.

'*Why*?' cried Mrs Cohen. 'Why are you doing this? We've always been here. You all know us. Ginny and Leo *Cohen*! Why? What have we done?'

'You're fucking *Jews*, ain't yer? Taking over our fucking shops and jobs! Get back to where you came from!' The last of the hooligans ran off, laughing.

'Come inside, Ginny, come in.' Mr Cohen, white as a sheet, was trembling. He turned to the bystanders, shocked and confused. What could he say?

'Bastards,' muttered an old man. 'Cowards. They want stringing up.'

'This is it then,' said another, 'they're back in business. It's started up again and this is just the beginning of more to come.'

'Beginning?' barked a third. 'Where've you bin 'iding out? You wanna walk along Whitechapel, see the windows that've been smashed there. Mosley's stirring things up again. Clever bastard. We might not 'ave 'ad the man's education but we know what he's up to!'

Emmie turned away. All she wanted was to be back in her kitchen having a drop of something in peace.

'Emmie! Come inside.' Rose's voice rang out above the gathering of angry people. It sounded like a headmistress issuing orders and it put Emmie's back up. First Rose had ordered her away and now she was ordering her back inside.

'I'm sorry but time's run on, Rose,' she said curtly. 'I should be elsewhere.'

Rose stepped towards Emmie and forced a smile. Squeezing her arm, she put her mouth to her ear and whispered an apology.

'There's no need,' said Emmie, drawing away. She had had enough.

'Don't let it all get churned up now, not after all this time, Emmie, please. Jessie will be deeply hurt if she finds out from someone else.'

'And so will Hannah. Perhaps you had best say something yourself before Jessie *does* hear it from other quarters. And maybe I should speak to Hannah. You can't keep this kind of thing bottled for ever. It's a sorry and sad thing if you can't speak straight to your own, Rose Warner.'

'But Emmie,' Rose gripped her friend's arm and Emmie could feel her trembling, 'we can't tell her, it wouldn't be fair or right, not after all this time. Think of my other children, Emmie.'

'I am, Rose, I am.'

'It's too late. Surely you can see that.'

'I shan't do anything, Rose,' Emmie said. 'The ball's in your court now. I've my own life to lead and three sons to think of.'

'We've got enough on our plates already,' said Rose, 'trouble coming in from outside.' She waved a hand at Mr Cohen's smashed window. 'We can't afford to cause grief between our own.'

'Bang on, Rose, and that's exactly why you should see to it that your own house is in order.' Emmie pulled her arm away. 'I shall tell my Tom in my own good time. I just thought you'd want to be aware that a storm may well be brewing. You can please yourself whether you act on it or not.' She turned and walked away, leaving Rose to stare after her.

It hadn't been easy but Emmie had done as she would be done by, and once the feeling of upset had gone, she would sleep easier for it. But the time between leaving Rose and clearing the dinner table that evening was very difficult. Trying to behave as if there was nothing playing on her mind had brought on a headache. While Charlie and the boys discussed boxing, Emmie mulled over how she might handle the problem of Tom, Hannah and Jessie. After much deliberation, she decided her only course of action was to tell Tom everything and persuade him not to see Jessie again.

Knowing that two of her sons and Charlie were going to listen to an important boxing match on the wireless, she pretended that her back was playing up and asked Tom to help her wash and wipe the dishes – he wasn't interested in boxing.

Rolling a cigarette, Tom compromised. 'I'm not wiping up and I'm definitely not wearing a pinny. I'll wash, you wipe.' Charlie, Stan and Johnnie left the kitchen very quickly, before they were roped into helping too.

Once they were by themselves, Emmie told her favourite son to sit down, she wanted to talk to him.

'Go on then,' he said, lighting his roll-up. 'I'm all ears. What's the matter?'

Nervously rearranging fruit in the bowl on the table, she began, 'It's about Jessie. Jessie Warner.'

'Oh yeah?' Tom's face brightened at the mention of Jessie's [illegible]

'I know you won't want to hear this, Tom, but I shouldn't waste your time with that one. I heard something when I was down the market.' She was suddenly breaking the promise to herself to be truthful. In fact, she was being as bad as Rose Warner had planned to be, slandering an innocent.

'I don't *believe* this! You've been snooping around, checking up.' Tom shook his head defiantly. 'You go too far, Mother.'

'Her name cropped up, Tom, right out of the blue,' Emmie persisted. 'She's a do-gooder. Nice-to-everyone type, and she's broken many a heart. They say she leads the lads on and then drops them cold.'

'You don't know the first thing about Jessie. Gossip, that's all you know.' Tom pushed his chair back to leave but Emmie grabbed his wrist and looked him straight in the eye.

'Yes, I do. I know quite a bit more than I've let on and now it's time to put you in the picture, whether I want to or not. I admit I wasn't telling the truth about her just now. I did make it up, but still you mustn't see her again.' She leaned back and waited for his response. He said nothing, just raised an eyebrow and waited. 'I know the family,' she continued, 'and I know the family history and that's not because I'm a nosy old cow.'

'Go on then. What's wrong with the family?'

'Nothing. There's nothing wrong with her family, not really. As it happens, Jessie's mother is a very old friend of mine. I can't tell you what a bombshell you dropped when you told me the family name.'

'So what's the problem?' He was making it obvious that his patience was being stretched.

'It's to do with Hannah. With Hannah and with Jessie. I'm afraid that you're piggy in the middle on this one. It was a one in a million chance that you and Jessie should meet and become friends. Not so with Hannah, that wasn't fate, that was prearranged. I was keeping an eye out for her, even before you brought her home. This isn't easy for me, Tom, so don't you start shouting and swearing, just sit there and listen, and trust that I know what I'm talking about.'

'I'm all ears.' He smoked his cigarette, waiting.

'Hannah and Jessie are sisters.' The stunned silence from Tom was something Emmie had not experienced before. She wasn't surprised at his quiet laughter a moment later; in fact, she was relieved by it. This was more like her Tom.

'Tch. The things you come out with, Mother.'

'You'll have to drop the idea of seeing Jessie, son, unless you never see Hannah again, and for the life of me I can't see how that'll come about. I can't cut her off and as sure as I'm sitting here I won't cut you off.' Emmie had to make Tom understand the seriousness of the situation.

'Well, that's something, I s'pose,' he said, smiling and leaning back. 'But you can't expect me to believe Hannah and Jessie are ... sisters.'

'It goes back, right back, to nineteen eighteen.'

'Oh, not the war, please.'

'Your dad fought alongside Robert Warner, Jessie and Hannah's dad, in northern France. Back here, me and Rose Blake, as she was known then, worked side by side at the sugar refinery. Rose and Robert were engaged at the time and if she hadn't fallen pregnant with the twins I think they'd have carried on with their plans to secure good positions before they married. Robert wanted to put a deposit down on a little semi in the suburbs and Rose wanted that too.'

'What did you just say?' Tom's voice sounded different, almost as if he really did have something stuck in his throat.

'Oh, for goodness sake, Tom. Listen and I won't have to repeat myself. Your dad fought alongside—'

'Not that!' His jaw clenched and he looked as if he was ready to hit someone. 'You know what I mean. You said *twins*.'

'That's right, son. Twins. Non-identical twins. Hannah and Jessie.' Giving time for it to soak in, Emmie went quiet.

'Oh, Mother,' he said, shaking his head. 'I hope you've got it wrong.' He glared at her and she just gazed back at him with a look in her eyes that said it all. No, she hadn't got it wrong.

'A shotgun wedding followed. Rose didn't carry well, which wasn't surprising, the young couple were living hand to mouth in one tiny room in a house which'd already been marked unfit to live in. Rose was a worker, scrubbed that room from top to bottom while Robert fixed and repaired windows, cupboards and doors, borrowing tools from your dad and using scraps of timber from the local yard.'

Tom eased himself forward, elbows on the table, and pushed his face close up to Emmie's. 'Are you really telling me that Hannah is Jessie's twin sister?'

'Robert was studying to be an architect,' Emmie carried on. 'He got work wherever he could, repairing and decorating, labouring backstage in the theatres, anything. In the end he had to give up his ambitions and get regular work down the docks. Eventually he went from being a labourer to a crane driver. So times got a bit easier for them but that was after they'd given up Hannah. Those times were very hard. You'd be surprised how much heartache people of our sort had to bear—'

'I'll get the violin out in a minute.' Tom's face was hard.

'You see, coming from a middle-class family, Robert had no skilled trade and unlike the rest of his kin, he wasn't cut out for the police force and had no intentions of joining the rank of city gentlemen. They was poor – too poor to support two babies and that was the simple truth of it. They had a hard choice to make

and it nearly broke Rose's heart but in the end they decided one of the girls would have to be adopted. It would be best for both of 'em, the only way to give 'em both a decent future.'

Tom held up a hand to stop her. 'What has all of this got to do with my seeing Jessie?'

'You'll be bringing together twins who were parted before they were a year old.'

He slowly shook his head. 'Well, if it's true, Hannah'll be pleased as punch to find out that Gerta the witch isn't her mother.'

Emmie sighed sadly. 'No, son, it's not quite like that. What a lovely fairy story that would make. The parents don't want Hannah back, they don't want the girls to find out that they've been kept apart all these years, that one of them was given away. Things are not as cut and dried as you like to think.'

'Well, they're gonna find out. One way or another. I'll tell 'em if you don't.'

'As I said, things are never that easy. Jack Blake, the man Hannah believes is her father, is really her uncle, Rose's half-brother. Jack Blake and his wife – Gerta – couldn't have their own kids, and they was planning to emigrate to New Zealand. It seemed the perfect solution – to pass Hannah to her own flesh and blood and send her off to a new future in a new land.' Emmie shook her head. 'It didn't work out like that, though. Jack and Gerta had an almighty bust up and he went off to New Zealand without her.' She looked sharply at Tom. 'But she loves that man more than anyone. Don't you think that that bit of news on its own would destroy her? Finding out after all this time that Jack's not really her dad?'

Tom glared at her, his face taut. 'They gave Hannah away and no one, *no one*, saw fit to tell her once she was old enough? No one told her she'd been adopted or that she had a *twin* sister? That her father was really her uncle? It stinks, Mother. It . . . *stinks*.'

'Yes, it does, but it was their wish and with something like this you have to abide by those wishes.'

'Bollocks to that. What about Jessie's dad, Robert? He seems a decent enough bloke. Didn't he want to make arrangements to see Hannah?'

'That was the idea at the time, but Gerta soon put a stop to it. Once they'd handed over the baby, new rules started to crop up until Gerta had managed to banish Rose and Robert altogether. Rose accepted it for the sake of the girls and I promised to keep an eye out for Hannah. When you brought her home that day after you'd had a fight in the playground and wanted me to clean her up before she faced Gerta, I felt as if God was at work, and that's why I swept her up as if she was an Orphan Annie. You and your brothers thought she was a replacement for the daughter I never had and that was fine by me.'

'But you knew what Hannah was going through, living with that dried-up bitch,' said Tom angrily. 'You should have said something *years* ago, you should 'ave refused to be part of it. It's not right!'

'No, Tom, it's not. But I'm not stepping in and neither are you! Leave it be. Hannah's come through and no doubt she'll find herself a nice young feller and go off and get married. Then she can make her own family.'

'She's only *seventeen*.'

'And so is Jessie! But I s'pose you're going to say that's different.'

'*Hannah's* different,' Tom said. 'Never wears lipstick and powder. Dresses more like a boy than a girl. She won't be in any hurry to get married. Family of her own? Now *you're* trying to turn a grim tale into a fairy story.' Tom ground out his cigarette furiously.

'Hannah dresses the way she does because Gerta's been too bloody mean to ever allow the poor girl to spend money on a nice frock or lipsticks. You've seen the way Jessie presents herself. Put Hannah in the same clothes and make-up and she's even prettier than her twin! If Rose could have had her wish, she and Robert

would have been able to raise both babies. It broke their hearts at the time and I *won't* see them go through any more grief! I won't! The secret is our burden too, and it must go with us to our graves.'

'Like hell it will,' Tom snapped.

'What's that supposed to mean?' said Emmie.

'It means that one of us is going to talk to Hannah – you can choose which one. And if I do start courting Jessie, I'll fetch her home to meet Dad and the boys. I'm not gonna add to things by keeping *her* hidden away.'

'And you don't think that's a bit thoughtless? A bit on the selfish side, to turn their lives upside down just because you've taken a fancy to Jessie?'

'No, I don't. You lot can't run our lives the way you ran your own.' Tom narrowed his eyes and glared at Emmie and she saw something she had never seen before. She saw loathing.

'I'm nineteen, not nine,' Tom went on. 'If I'd known earlier about Hannah, I would 'ave told her. As it is, you've put me right in the middle. You're just as bad as that German bitch she's had to put up with all these years.'

Emmie was deeply wounded, both by his words and by his anger. 'I'm gonna forget you said that, son. Let's put it down to reaction. You've had a bit of a shock and this is your way of—'

'Don't gimme all that toffee, Mother! I'm not a kid.' The expression on his face was unyielding, and Emmie could see that, right then, he despised her, that she was no longer his wonderful mum but an interfering old cow.

'I think you should sort out your loyalties, Tom.' Emmie moved towards the door; she needed to be by herself. It wasn't easy, being despised by her own son.

'And maybe you should sort out your loyalties,' Tom shot back. 'Stop trying to rule everyone's lives, and that includes Dad's. He's been under your thumb for too long.' He reached out for his tobacco tin. 'If you think you're gonna rule me as

well, you're mistaken. If I want to see Jessie, I will. If I want to introduce her to Hannah, I will. It's my business now and if you don't like it, next time keep your secrets to yourself!'

Emmie felt sure this outburst wasn't coming out of the moment, but was an opinion of her that he must have held for some time. She wondered miserably if her other sons saw her in the same light; perhaps she had been living in cloud cuckoo land, all that fetching and carrying and baking . . . Maybe they'd all been taking the rise behind her back.

She turned to look at Tom, sitting at the kitchen table, his head nestled in his hands. 'Did you mean all of that?'

'Mum, please. Go and have a lie-down or something. I want to be by myself for a minute. You can stop worrying, I won't go on the foursome, I'll send a mate in my place, but that's not to say I'm leaving it there. I'll get Sally to put in a good word for me and keep Jessie sweet till I've decided what's for the best.'

Emmie felt a strong urge to go to him, to hold him close, but it wasn't the right time. She had seen him go from one courtship to another but this time he really did look like a man in love. Sod's law, she thought. Sod's law.

Chapter Three

When Sally Brown slipped Jessie a note from Tom in the factory canteen, her first reaction was to tear it up but she thought better of it. She didn't know Sally that well and she might report everything back to Tom. Why should she let the rotter believe he had got under her skin? Feigning airy indifference, Jessie pushed the note into her cardigan pocket to read again in private and went back to her office. She had gone like a lamb to the slaughter that night, turning up outside the Odeon, wearing her best clothes, waiting like an idiot in the drizzling rain. When Sally, Ron and a complete stranger arrived, she had wanted the ground to open up. The pathetic excuse given by Sally's boyfriend, Ron, was that Tom had sprained his ankle. In the note that Sally had given her, he'd written that he had put his back out playing football.

At her desk, Jessie took the envelope from her pocket and read it again before tearing it into small pieces and throwing it in the bin. Tom had had the gall to write that he would like to see her again, one day. She had taken a big risk going on that date behind Max's back; had he found out, she might well have lost him and deservedly so.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, she didn't hear the door open or Sally come into the office.

'What did he say?' Sally whispered from behind.

'Tell him to drop dead when you see him and say that I wouldn't go out with him if he was the last man alive and sound as if I mean it because I do,' snapped Jessie.

'I *knew* he wanted to see you. I knew it!'

'Well, you needn't sound so pleased, Sally, because I don't want to see him, so there won't be another foursome arranged, not with me there leastways.'

'Oh yeah, pull the other one,' teased Sally. 'You know you fancy going out with him.'

Jessie spun round to face her. 'I do mean it, actually. I'm only sorry I said yes in the first place. I am courting, you know.'

A loud, deliberate clearing of the throat came from behind the frosted glass partition; Jessie's boss, Mr Reed, was making it clear he didn't want Sally in there. 'You'd best go, I've got loads of work.'

'Miserable old sod. He needs a seeing to. I'll send Betty the bust from talcum powder round. *My* office manager never minds if one of the girls comes in for a quick natter.' Sally deliberately raised her voice. 'Anyone'd think we was in *prison*!'

'I'm trying to concentrate, Jessie. Would you please ask your friend to leave?' Mr Reed spoke in a quiet, controlled voice.

'I'll see you later and you can tell me exactly what was in that note,' chirped Sally. 'Tom's a right cracker and he's got it bad for you – lucky cow.' There was another, louder, clearing of the throat from behind the screen.

'She's just going, Mr Reed. Sorry about that.' Angry, Jessie waved Sally away and out of the office. If Tom really had thought anything of her, he wouldn't have stood her up. Sally was good fun but not very bright. She grinned at the impatient Jessie and hovered by the door.

'Can I ask you a question, Mr Reed?' said Sally in her best voice, the one she sometimes used when sitting on the switchboard in the post room.

'Very well. Just one.'

'Thanks. Well, we all know what's gonna happen on

the twelfth, don't we?' There was a touch of excitement in her voice.

'Get to the point, Sally.'

'Well, the point is, Mr Reed, I thought it would be nice if we could get up a charabanc and all go together to watch the procession from Buckingham Palace, after the coronation. They're 'aving street parties round our way but I'd much prefer to go to Buckingham Palace, wouldn't you, Mr Reed?'

'I shall be going, as a matter of fact, with my family.' His tone had changed, he sounded relaxed and friendly. 'My children are very excited about it. I'm pleased to see you take an interest in our current history.'

'Current 'istory?' Sally looked at Jessie and pulled a face. 'The King and Queen are getting crowned! Course I'm interested. Wouldn't miss it for the world.' This conversation between Mr Reed and Sally was being carried out through the frosted glass partition; neither of them could see the other. 'Them princesses are lucky cows, ain't they? Elizabeth and Margaret. You seen them frocks they wear, tch, all silk and satin and velvet. Still, there you go, they are royal, ain't they? They're bound to dress like that. I would if my dad was a king.'

Jessie was worried that Mr Reed would lose his patience with her. 'You'd best go now,' she whispered. 'I'm going with Mum, Dolly and the boys. You can come with us if you like.'

'It's unfortunate,' said Mr Reed reflectively from behind his screen, 'that the Duke of Windsor abdicated. A king of England, getting involved with an American divorcee. Scandalous. It'll be a blot on the history books I'm afraid.'

Sally smiled, a soppy expression on her face. 'Ah well ... he loves 'er, don't he? Must do. To give up a kingdom. Romantic, I think.'

'Mmm. That'll be all then, Sally,' said Mr Reed, ending the conversation with a tone of finality.

Sally looked at Jessie and curled her top lip in a comical fashion. 'Oh right, I'll be off then.' She turned to leave but was

struck by another thought. 'I tell you what will be a blot on the 'istory books, Mr Reed.'

'What's that, Sally?'

'Old Blue Eyes the Duke being mates with Adolf Hitler. I mean, that Hitler's not a very nice man is he, all the trouble he keeps causing to the Jews and that. You wouldn't fink someone who was once King of England would be mates with someone like that.'

'We don't know that they're friends, Sally. People in high places often have to mix with others in high places. It's the way of things. 'Now, enough chat, Sally. Be on your way.'

'Oh right ... if you say so, Mr Reed, if you say so. You bosses know best.' Sally backed out of the office, whispering, 'Fancy a coffee after work, Jess?'

Warming to Sally again, Jessie slowly shook her head, disappointed. 'Can't. Max is meeting me outside the gates.'

'Ne'er mind. Tomorrow, yeah?'

'All right. Tomorrow.'

Later, Jessie sat opposite Max, enjoying his treat of a cup of coffee and cake in Joe Lyons. He was unusually quiet, his dark eyes troubled and Jessie could tell there was something on his mind. There was no point in pressing it, he would tell her in his own good time. 'You do know that the Vicky park fair opens tonight, Max?' she said hopefully.

'It'll be there for two weeks, Jessie. We can go on Saturday,' Max replied in a flat voice.

'I thought it would be nice to go on the first night. It's where we first met,' she said, 'remember?'

'That was over two years ago,' he said dismissively.

'True.' Obviously sentimentality wasn't going to work, she thought.

[redacted]

'But?' said Jessie, annoyed.

'But what?'

'But you don't want to go.' She waited for an answer.

It didn't come. 'You don't seem very happy, Max, bloody miserable, in fact. I know you're not one for smiling for nothing but you're giving me the blues as well.'

'I'm not very happy, Jessie, no. You seem chirpy enough, though.'

'Well, I would, wouldn't I? I'm sitting here with you, enjoying coffee and cake, and you know this is my favourite place . . .'

'Times are bad,' he said, shaking his head, 'really bad.' Max didn't look up, just slowly stirred his coffee.

'I thought that trade had picked up. That your mum and dad's shop was doing quite well. Mum's shoe menders is up on last year.' Jessie tried to jolly him with her optimistic tone.

'I'm not talking about trade, although in a sense that has something to do with it. Blackshirts.' Max pushed his hands across his face and ran his fingers through his dark hair. 'It's getting worse. The more successful we Jews are, the more they see us as fair game.'

'It'll pass. Street warfare, that's all it is, at least that's what you've been saying over the past couple of years. They haven't been back since the egg smashing, have they?'

'No, but my parents are really frightened. It's why I wanted us to meet up now instead of later.' He looked at her earnestly.

Jessie couldn't remember ever having seen Max so serious and worried. 'Why? What's happening later?'

'There's a meeting at Harry Zeid's house, one of our members. We're keeping it quiet though.'

'Why? Why do you have to keep it a secret?' She didn't like the sound of it.

'Well, whenever we've met at the club just recently, things have gone wrong. Hymie comes with good information as to where the Blackshirts are going to hold a meeting or which hoarding they plan to stick their posters on, and it doesn't happen. We go to the venues – and nothing. We check the

hoarding, ready to tear down the propaganda – nothing. Then we hear that meetings were held elsewhere and we see the bloody posters on hoardings we didn't know about.'

'There's a spy in the camp,' she said, teasing him. She couldn't help feeling this was all nothing serious, just boys enjoying their games, pretending it was all real.

'It's no laughing matter,' Max said, frowning. 'Anyway, there'll be just a dozen of us. If it happens again, that narrows the odds of finding out who it is. We can't rely on Communists or the Labour Party or the Liberals. If we're to avoid a repeat of what's happening in Germany and what happened in Austria, we've got to be more organised. The Jewish Party needs to change and become more disciplined. East End Jews have been singled out deliberately. The press focuses on the Fascism against Jews in the East End which keeps attention off other towns, where it's probably just as bad. More publicity means more trouble here, in Whitechapel. The Blackshirts are being seen as heroes, and the pack grows by the day.'

'And because of that, we can't go to the fair, kind sir?' she said, trying to lighten things.

'I wouldn't have gone in any case, not with the mood as it is. The thugs are out there hungry for blood. Jewish blood.'

'Show them you don't care. Brazen it out.' Jessie sipped her coffee, while Max stared at her with concern in his eyes.

'But I do care, Jessie. I care about my parents, my aunts and uncles . . . Grandpa . . .'

'Now you *are* being daft. Remember Cable Street? Just about everyone came out against the Fascists. A policeman even surrendered to your lot and Mosley was turned back, the march cancelled. You *won* that demonstration, and there'll never be another as well-planned. Come on, Max, you remember, everyone came forward against them, it was a triumph. The streets were packed with people doing whatever they could to stop Mosley getting through. Dockers, shopkeepers, housewives, kids even.'

'But that show's over, Jessie. You can't do something like that a second time. We Jews are passive by nature—'

'Until you're under threat! Even I remember the bricks and coshes, Max. Your lot are just as bad if not worse than the Blackshirts when push comes to shove.' Easing off one shoe, Jessie stroked his calf with her toe. 'Don't go to the meeting tonight. Let's go back to your house and play a nice record on the gramophone. We can turn the lights down low, lie on the sofa . . .'

Smiling at her, Max shook his head. 'I can't. I promised.' By the look in his big, soft brown eyes, she thought she might just win him over.

'Please. Just this once. Miss the meeting for me just this one time. I want to show you how much I love you. I'm wearing your favourite . . .' she waited for him to finish the sentence.

'Perfume?' He was beginning to weaken.

'Nooo . . .'

'Stockings?'

'Close, Max. Very close.'

'Well, the meeting's not until eight . . .' He reached across the small table and squeezed her hand. 'And as it happens my parents are out. We'll have the place to ourselves.'

Outside, Jessie impulsively guided him towards Violet Alley, where it was dark except for the dim street lamp. She slid her hands across his broad shoulders and caressed his neck, her soft blue eyes gazing into his. 'Do you love me, Max?'

'Of course I do. I've said so, haven't I?' He nuzzled her neck and murmured, 'It's a waste of my time telling you, Jessie, if you don't believe me.'

She smiled, moved closer and kissed him on the mouth. She would shake him out of his dour mood. Kissing him with passion, she slipped her hand inside his jacket, pulled at his shirt, then eased both her hands inside onto the warm flesh of his back. Within seconds Max's hands were everywhere, his breathing heavy and hot. Once aroused, Max never wasted time.

Lifting her skirt above her waist, he pulled the loose leg of her silk knickers to one side and pushed himself deep into her soft, fleshy crevice.

'Oh God, darling . . . you're adorable,' he moaned, his voice deep and husky. 'Who needs music . . .' He kissed her again and before she could answer he was affording himself protection against fatherhood. Thrusting himself back inside, as if there wasn't a second to lose, he quickly reached the heights of his passion. Once again she was left wondering if this was all there was to lovemaking. The earth did not move for her the way it did for Max.

Coming out of Violet Alley, arms round each other, they bumped into one of Max's friends and before she knew it, Jessie was being guided back into the coffee house, with his comrade in tow. There she listened patiently to Max and David for more than an hour until she was bored to death with their conversation. 'Well,' she said at last, 'it's all been very interesting, but I'm going to leave you to it, boys.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Max splayed his hands. 'Not another political word, I promise.'

'You can't blame us, Jessie,' said David, nudging his loose glasses up and back into place, 'and we're not the only ones, you know. Quite a few of our friends are going to Spain to fight for what we see as the struggle against Fascism.'

'Pity they don't stop *here* and fight against it, then you and Max wouldn't be so concerned about being outnumbered by Blackshirts, David.' Jessie leaned over the table, smiled at him and then tapped his wristwatch. 'You've been going on about Spain for twenty minutes. Before that it was Hungary, and before that, Berlin.'

'Well,' said David, 'these are very worrying times, Jessie. Very worrying.'

'Yes, well, the debate's over for me. I'm going home. You can go on reasoning for and against joining or not joining the group leaving for Spain. If you want to link up with the International

Brigade in the revolutionary fight against the Fascists in Madrid, *do it.*' She pulled on her blue felt hat and pushed up the brim. 'But if you ask me, I don't think that either of you will leave England – but talk it over for another couple of hours, why don't you?' Leaving Max to his companion she stalked out of the coffee shop.

By the autumn, Max and David had still gone no further than London, other than in their dreams, but Jessie had to admit that more and more Fascist and anti-Fascist slogans were appearing in the streets, and Max had been right about one thing – the mood was worsening. People huddled in clusters, talking earnestly, their discussions sombre as the days got shorter and the nights colder.

Pushing the key into the lock of the front door after a refreshing walk home from work, Jessie wondered if her earlier damp mood had been brought on by some of the men at work going on about the atrocities abroad. As far as she was concerned, it would do more good if the British people focused more on the good things that were being reported on the wireless and in the newspapers. Industry was soaring and factories were booming with the demand for electrical appliances. Chain stores such as Boots and Marks and Spencer were opening dozens of new branches, and hire purchase was making things affordable to working-class families such as hers and Max's.

Inside the house, the familiar sounds of Stephen and Alfie playing Lotto and Rose moving around in the kitchen eased some of the tension Jessie felt, though she couldn't get rid of her nagging worry about her brother, Alfie.

Just recently, when tidying the boys' bedroom, she had discovered a packet of Woodbines and two cigarette stubs under Alfie's bed. Inside the cigarette packet was half-a-crown and to her horror she also found a sheath knife. She knew that Alfie had been hanging around with older lads of fifteen and she'd heard him using very bad language once or twice. More

worrying than the smoking or the foul swearing was where the money was coming from to buy the cigarettes. If Alfie'd been dipping into Rose's shop till, as Jessie suspected, it would really shake her. She'd always had a tendency to think that her children were above serious wrongdoing. And what of the knife? Where had he got that from?

Going to her room, Jessie promised herself that she would at least mention the smoking when the time was right. Relaxing on her bed, she thought about Max and wondered if he would ever pop the question and if so whether she would accept. Lately he seemed to talk about nothing but politics or money. He was now working for a small accountancy firm and was never happier than when faced with columns of figures and difficult calculations.

She loved Max no less than when they first started to go out together and she still found everything about him attractive – the way he dressed, his sometimes dry sense of humour, his handsome face and thick black hair. Why then did she still not melt the way he did when they were locked together in passion? Max would never know it, but apart from enjoying his kisses, she really did the rest to please him; she got her pleasure from that. But did other girls do it for the same reason?

She was deep in thought as to how she might broach the subject with Sally when the bedroom door opened. She was surprised to see young Stephen in the doorway. He was tearful and pathetic. His lips and cheeks had been reddened with one of Dolly's lipsticks and their mother's hairnet was on his head. Worse still, he was wearing nothing but a brassiere and a pair of Dolly's crepe knickers. She heard laughter from the boys' bedroom, not just from Alfie but from Dolly too.

'They . . . made . . . me . . .' He could hardly get the words out and he was shivering with cold. Jessie was off the bed and beside him in a flash, pulling him close and telling him to take no notice of them. Slamming the door shut she leaned on it so they couldn't come in.

'Take everything off, Stephen. Take off the knickers and rip them up. That'll teach Dolly a lesson. They're her best ones.'

Stephen just stood there, quietly sobbing and shaking his head. 'They'll ... tell ... everyone.'

Jessie knelt in front of him and looked into his face, smiling. 'No they won't, sweetheart, because I know things about Dolly – and Alfie too.' She pulled off the hairnet and wrapped her grey blanket round him, covering his skinny white body. 'They've got nothing up here, Stephen,' she tapped the side of her head. 'Their skulls are filled with cold porridge and hard-boiled eggs.'

A smile spread across his tear-stained face. 'That's why Dolly's always farting. Hard-boiled eggs do that to you. So do porridge oats.'

'Well, there you are then,' she laughed. 'They're full of wind.'

'They need a dose of syrup of figs.'

'Or caster oil?' said Jessie, egging him on.

'Or both?' He threw back his head and laughed. 'Let's give them both.'

'Yeah, let's do that,' she said, clasping his shoulders. 'Let's give it to them on Sunday. They won't 'ave a clue what they're scoffing when they eat trifle at tea time on Sunday.'

'Yes! Yes!' He jumped up and down, his eyes bright and shining again. 'And I'll get to the lavatory before they do. I'll lock myself in and before I come out I'll hide every bit of bottom newspaper up my jumper.' If only the other two would give Stephen half a chance, thought Jessie, he'd brighten up their days with his sense of humour. 'And it won't just be their vest bottoms that'll be yellow,' he added, giggling.

'Shush, Stephen, keep your voice down. They'll hear you and—'

A short sharp rap on the door stopped her mid-sentence. Jessie knew it was her father because he was the only one who knocked on the bedroom door.

'What's going on in there?'

'Nothing, Dad. It's just me and Stephen having a giggle.' Knowing he'd want to come in, and seeing the frightened look on her brother's face, she told her father she was in her underwear and that Stephen was taking the mickey out of her bloomers.

'Well, keep your voices down, your mother's listening to the wireless.' There was a pause but they knew he was still out there. 'Stephen, the lads have arranged a game of street football for tomorrow afternoon, after school. Why don't—'

'Good idea, Dad!' he called back, quick off the mark. 'I'll score a goal and show 'em.' Both Jessie and Stephen had to cover their mouths to stop him from realising that they were taking the rise.

'That's the ticket, son. That's the ticket.' Robert went downstairs a happier man.

Stephen stood in front of Jessie, bending both arms and flexing muscles which were as flat as fried eggs. She dropped onto her bed and buried her face in the pillow. Taking a sly glance at what he was up to next, Jessie roared with laughter – he was playing to his audience of one, striding around the room mimicking the strong man who broke out of chains outside the Tower of London. In that moment, Jessie knew that it didn't matter about him dressing up or being a skinny waif; one day her Stephen would be in the limelight, on stage, accepting rapturous applause with all the confidence in the world.

Sunday soon came round. Stephen had reminded Jessie three times what they were going to do with the syrup of figs. Making her way to the kitchen and looking forward to turning a boring sweet into something else, Jessie overheard her parents talking and was thankful that Stephen wasn't with her.

'Well, if you hadn't mollycoddled him from the start, Rose, he might well be out there now, with the other kids.'

'Oh, stop going on about it, Robert. If the truth be known it's only your own pride that bothers you. You always wanted he-men for sons.'

'Don't be silly. I just wish he was more like Alfie, that's all.'

That rankled, and before Jessie could stop herself, she was in there, surprising them with her sudden arrival. 'I don't think you'd say that if you knew what I found under Alfie's bed.'

They turned and looked at her, waiting.

'He's been smoking. I found a packet of Woodbines when I pulled his comics out from underneath.'

Instead of anger she saw her father's expression relax and then turn into a smile before he burst out laughing. 'So that's where he keeps 'em – the crafty little bastard.'

'Robert!' Rose slammed down the tea towel and stood with hands on hips. 'You just *swore*.' She spoke as if she truly couldn't believe it. 'And in front of our Jessie *and* on a Sunday!' Jessie wondered which her mother felt most protective towards, her or Sunday.

'I never swore,' he said, a touch defensive. 'The word's in the dictionary, Rose.'

'That's right, and with a clear definition, so now tell me that Alfie's a bastard.'

Jessie could hardly believe her ears; never, not once in her entire life had she heard either of them use that word. Twice in one day was unthinkable.

'I came to make the trifles,' she murmured, reminding them that she was there. 'I asked Stephen if he'd give me a hand, if that's all right.' They noticed her nervousness and did their best to relax back into a Sunday mood.

'Of course it's all right,' said Rose, 'and if you don't want to do it this week, Jessie, ask Dad to help Stephen. It won't be the first time he's made the trifles for me.' She eyed Robert, daring him to say that their younger son should be anywhere but in the kitchen – the woman's place.

'Twice. I've made the trifles twice, Rose. Once when you were laid up with tonsillitis and once when you were in bed nursing your baby.' He looked at Jessie and winked. 'Our little

Alfie. She gave me a strapping son – a ten-pound baby boy. I cooked the roast that day as well. I was so proud, I would've baked a cake if your mother had wanted it.'

Jessie glanced at Rose to see that she was blushing and was obviously flattered.

'Oh, go on up for your nap,' she said, giving Robert a warm smile. 'I'll be there shortly.'

'So what about Alfie smoking?' Jessie was puzzled by their indifference, she'd expected them to go through the roof.

Robert stepped towards the kitchen door and squeezed her shoulder. 'Boys will be boys, Jessie. But don't you worry, we know all about it, we've got a card up our sleeve. We'll offer him one of his own Woodbines and get him to smoke a whole one in front of us. I guarantee he'll be sick afterwards and won't be able to look at another one, let alone put it to his lips.'

When Jessie was alone with her mother, she decided to take the opportunity to ask her a question that had been on her mind for some time. She had been too wary of her mother's displeasure to ask before but over the last few months her curiosity had grown so much she could barely contain it. It was time to take the plunge and ask. 'Mum,' she said hesitantly, hoping her mother's good mood would last, 'why did Grandfather change his and your name?'

Rose slowly turned round, her smile gone and a haunted look on her face. 'Why do you ask that, Jessie, and right out of the blue? You are a strange girl.'

'Because I don't understand it. It keeps on coming back into my mind. There must be a simple explanation.'

'It's not a puzzle. I expect it was just something he did to please Granny Blake, used her name instead of his own because he already had a wife. I don't know and to be honest I wish you'd stop thinking about my parents.' Rose closed her eyes and sighed and Jessie could see the pain on her mother's face.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked.' Jessie moved towards her mother but Rose put up a hand to stop her.

'I don't really know why he changed his name, Jessie, but I can see you're not going to rest until you know as much as I do.' She turned her face away. 'Tomorrow. I'll tell you tomorrow, when we're by ourselves. Now let's leave it at that.' She walked out of the kitchen, leaving Jessie frustrated and wondering why her mother always put off telling her things.

'We gonna make the trifles then?'

She spun around to find that Stephen was in the doorway. His innocent, smiling face warmed her.

'Come here, funny face.' She held out her arms and he wrapped his skinny self round her waist. Hugging him, she kissed the top of his head. 'I love you, do you know that?'

'I love you too, Jess,' he said, adding, 'Did you find the syrup of figs?'

'No, but I found the caster oil.' She reached for custard powder and a packet of jelly. 'But we mustn't go too heavy, Stephen, just a drop in each of their glass dishes. Enough to teach them a lesson, that's all. It won't happen straightaway, you know. It takes hours to work, overnight even.'

'Not if you put twice as much in.'

'No, I'm not doing that. You'll have to be patient. You'll get your own back, don't worry,' she said, tousling his hair.

'If it hasn't worked by the time I go to bed I won't be able to sleep.'

'Stop trying to blackmail me. Anyway, you'll probably be gassed in the night by Alfie farting – that'll send you off.'

The following morning, Jessie woke out of a strange dream and knew there was something she had to remember. It came in a flash and she was out of bed and on her way downstairs in no time, wrapped in her favourite grey blanket.

'You're up early, Jessie. Your dad's only just left for work. Did the front door closing wake you?' asked Rose.

'No. I didn't hear him go.'

'Well, since you're down you might as well have a cup of

tea, there's one in the pot. And here, put these on your feet. They're your dad's old ones. You'll catch pneumonia walking about barefoot.'

'I woke up thinking about you this morning,' said Jessie, pulling on the thick hand-knitted socks. 'I was wondering what it must have been like all these years, not seeing or knowing where your own mum was. Did you ever try to find her?'

'I hardly knew my mother, you're making too much of it.' Rose joined Jessie at the table. 'It doesn't bother Dolly so why does it bother you so much?'

'I don't know. I just feel as if a part of our family is missing, that's all. I can't help it. I can't stop my mind from thinking about it.' Jessie considered. 'Maybe it's because Max's family, his heritage, is so important to him.'

'A part of our family missing? And you think that's because you never knew your grandmother?'

'It must be, mustn't it? Why else would I feel like this? Dolly's different from me, she can shrug things off. I can't help the way I am. I've tried to be more like her. God knows why.'

'All right, Jessie, I'll tell you all there is to know since I've promised and that'll be the end of it.'

Rose related everything in a passive voice, as if she was reeling off someone else's life story. She had been eight years old when she was put into a children's home, and she hadn't seen her mother since but could remember her. Her father had appeared at the home one day and taken her away to live with him and the strange woman she was to look upon as her new mother – Grandmother Blake. Her half-brothers were born over the next five years and although she got on with them, she never really felt she was as much a part of the family as they were.

Willy had dismissed any questions Rose had asked about her real mother until she stopped bothering to ask, and all she could remember about those times was that Willy had stopped smiling and laughing the way he used to. She could vaguely remember the house they'd once lived in but had no idea where it was.

Only when she described her tiny bedroom did Rose show any emotion, and even then she covered it well.

She went on to say that her real mother had spoken with an accent, which she realised now had been German. That much she could remember. She knew that her mother had been born in Germany and that her father, Willy, was half Polish, half German, but unlike her mother he had been born and bred in England, and that was why he didn't have a German or Polish accent.

'So there you have it,' said Rose, ending her story, though for Jessie it was only the beginning. 'Not such a mystery after all, is it, Jess? And not all that interesting. I should have your wash-down now, the water in the copper's just about the right temperature. Thank goodness we'll soon be on electricity, and with a bit of luck, by this time next year, your dad will have converted the back room into a bathroom. Isn't *that* something to look forward to?'

Rose went about her work, preparing breakfast and packed lunches as usual. In the scullery, Jessie filled the big blue and white jug with water from the copper and poured it into the china bowl, her mind on her grandfather and why he had changed his name.

'There must have been another reason for him to change his name,' she said to herself but loud enough to catch her mother's ear. 'It couldn't have been just to please Grandmother Blake surely.'

'Maybe it was all down to the war,' said Rose from the kitchen. 'Several Germans living over here then did the same thing. Your great-grandfather's shoe mender shop was burned down because he was a German. He opened another one later, once the war was over, which is the one we've got now. He was a clever man.' Rose's voice took on a worried tone. 'He always warned that it wasn't finished and that there'd be another break-out in the thirties or forties . . .'

'People at work are saying they can see another war coming.

They say Hitler won't lie down,' Jessie said, coming back into the kitchen.

'It's a wonder no one's shot that man in the back,' said Rose sharply, 'the amount of degradation he's causing to people he thinks inferior. I dread to think what those poor Jews and gypsies are going through in Austria. I don't know where it will all end. This Blackshirt business should have died out by now but it hasn't. Hitler's probably behind that as well, making chums with Mosley who's too slow to see he's being used. If I had my way we'd move out of the East End tomorrow, to the countryside, away from all the troubles.'

'Where there's no work,' said Jessie.

'Where there's no work,' agreed Rose.

'Did Grandfather fight in the war? He never spoke about it.'

'No. They needed people like him back here. He was the finest bootmaker around. Many Home Guards wore boots that your grandfather or his apprentice made. It's a pity none of my half-brothers wanted to learn the trade. I think that's why I took an interest in the shop, if truth be known. But I don't understand why people, women as well as men, are joining the Blackshirts, Jessie. I suppose they're frightened that unemployment will get worse again. They've had enough of having to watch their children go hungry and cold in the past. Now that things are better they want it to stay that way.'

Dolly stormed into the kitchen. 'There must have been something wrong with that trifle you made, Jessie. I had to get up in the night and use the chamber pot. I bet Stephen never washed his hands before helping you!'

'Yes he did. I hope you've emptied and washed the pot if you 'ave used it. I never heard you go out to the back yard.'

'Well, you wouldn't, Jessie, would you? Fast asleep and snoring while I was out there with a torch, freezing to death!' Dolly, looking rather paler than usual, turned to Rose. 'Her

and Stephen put something in my trifle, I know they did, to get back at me.'

'Back at you for what, Dolly?' asked Jessie, smiling. She knew her sister would never openly admit what she and Alfie had done to Stephen. 'I don't know what you're going on about. I thought the trifle was smashing.'

'It was very good', said Rose. 'I expect you ate too much and too quickly, Dolly.'

Stephen and Alfie appeared next, and Alfie, too, looked a sorry sight. His face was bright red with embarrassment; he had his bed sheet rolled into a ball. 'This is for washing,' he said. 'I soiled the bed.'

'Alfie!' Rose was taken aback more by his language than the state of his bedding. 'Don't you dare use that word again, my lad!'

'It wasn't my fault that it happened.' His pride really had taken a bashing. 'I thought it was a fart—'

'That's enough!' snapped Rose. 'We haven't even had breakfast yet!'

Jessie winked at Stephen who hid a grin.

'What shall I do with it then?' Alfie asked, backing away.

'Oh, put it outside in the yard, in the tin bath, and turn the tap on it.' His face went from bright red to off-white and Rose wondered if both he and Dolly were going down with something. 'Once you've done that,' she said, 'go on back to bed. You can have the day off school.'

'I don't want the day off, just the afternoon. I'm playing in the football match in the morning and—'

'You go for the day or not at all,' said Rose, 'and no more of your bargaining. Go back to bed or get washed and dressed. Suit yourself.' She sat down, shaking her head. 'I'm beginning to wish none of you had grown up, it was easier when you were small. Now you've all got minds of your own.'

'Ah, but we are still children at heart, Mum,' said Jessie. 'We've just got bigger, that's all.'

'Mmm,' murmured Rose, unconvinced.

'I haven't got bigger,' said Stephen. 'I'm under average – nurse at school said so.' The remark warmed Rose. She held out an arm to him and Stephen was in there like a shot, on her lap and cuddling up, gazing longingly at his thumb.

'Don't you dare,' said Rose. 'You might be under average but you're not a baby.'

Later that day, after work, Jessie slipped into her bedroom and lay on her bed, thrilled by what she had found out during her extended lunch break. Mr Reed had asked her if there was anything preying on her mind as she seemed preoccupied. His question surprised her, he almost had her feeling like an equal.

In actual fact his concern was for himself. Jessie was a good and reliable employee and he was worried about losing her. He had been wondering if she was toying with the idea of taking a position elsewhere. When she explained that she wanted to find her real grandmother but wasn't sure how to go about it, he became interested and she was surprised to discover that for some years he had been researching his own family line. He now had a family tree going right back to the seventeenth century and was not going to stop there. Mr Reed told her to go to Somerset House in the City and explained in detail how to go about tracing her grandmother in the records.

Jessie had thanked him from the bottom of her heart and Mr Reed had clearly been moved by her sincerity. He suggested she make a start by taking an extended lunch break which she could make up on another day. She did as he suggested and having followed to the letter the advice he had given her, she found what she was looking for at Somerset House. An entry in the records. Her grandmother was alive and living not so far away, by Victoria Park.

In her room, brushing her long wavy hair, Jessie was going over the fabricated story she would tell her parents as to where she was going this evening, when Dolly appeared.

'Mum needs a hand with the washing up, Jessie – if you

can pull yourself away from that mirror. I would help but I'm off to the Sally Army.'

Turning to look at Dolly, Jessie grinned at her. 'Pull the other leg. Sally Army? You?'

'They're meeting up outside the Salmon and Ball pub, on the corner of Cambridge Heath Road, and—'

'I know where it is, Dolly. Since when were you interested in the Salvation Army?'

'I'm not. It's one of the band players I'm interested in, a tall, dark, handsome musician,' she said, admiring herself in the mirrored wardrobe. 'He plays the tuba. It's why he joined the corps, so he could be part of a band. He wants to be a professional and one day play with the big bands.'

'So you're going to join up,' said Jessie, smiling, 'wear the uniform and do all that goes with it, are you?'

'If I have to. It's what musicians' girlfriends do. He's broke, of course, like all performers before they get their big break. He's a road sweeper at the moment and loves his old work horse – that's why he took the job. If he's not playing his tuba he's in old man Lipka's stable, brushing down that old mare. He'll have a stallion of his own one day and canter along country lanes.'

'And Fred?' Jessie wondered what had become of Dolly's old boyfriend.

'Too childish and he's got no ambition. He'll be a foundry worker all his life. Where's your rose-red lipstick?' Dolly rummaged through the side drawer of the dressing table.

'And Mum's pleased, is she – that you're showing an interest?'

'Course she is, she reckons that you should join as well, said it would be right down your street. I didn't agree. I said you'd take it all too seriously.'

'Really? And what did she say to that?'

'Never uttered a word, went straight into her quiet mood. She knows I'm right.'

'I would sooner you didn't use my lipsticks, Dolly,' said Jessie, watching her sister stroke her best one across her lips.

'Don't be selfish. I don't mind if you borrow mine. I've said so.' She hadn't, but there was no point in arguing with her, she would only insist she had.

'Yours are too bright and too cheap. You go out with well-shaped lips and come home with a big red smudge.'

'Do I now? Well, we can't all afford the best, can we, Jessie?'

'You could if you bought one or two good ones and made 'em last.'

'Said the old woman to the girl. I'm gonna have to have a word with Max, you need a good bit of the other to bring you alive.'

Jessie smiled to herself. Dolly believed she was a virgin.

Her mother's footsteps sounded on the stairs, and a moment after Dolly left the bedroom, Rose appeared in the doorway.

'You needn't help in the kitchen, Jessie,' she said. 'I'm making Alfie do the drying for a change, a punishment for being cheeky at school. They sent a note home.'

'That's good, because I'm going out soon, to the Whitechapel Art Gallery to listen to a talk on the designer, William Morris.' Jessie extended her lie, saying that after the talk there was to be a demonstration on weaving, embroidery, and tapestry.

'I s'pose Dolly's told you where *she*'s off to.' Rose was obviously relieved to think that her wayward daughter was showing signs of reforming. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army in the mid-eighteen hundreds, was Rose's hero. She'd often recited one of his lines: 'Some men's ambition is art, some men's ambition is fame, some men's ambition is gold. My ambition is the souls of men.'

'Maybe she's turning over a new leaf at last,' said Jessie.

'Oh, I shouldn't be so lofty about her. She's a bit strong-willed but in your own way you're no different, Jessie. I just wish she wouldn't wear so much lipstick and powder. I see that

Vaseline's no longer the mode, she's using mascara and eyebrow pencil now. What time does the lecture begin?'

'Seven o'clock sharp. I'd best get my skates on. I'll jump on the bus and—'

'So,' she looked directly at Jessie, 'you're not being like your sister and secretly meeting a new boyfriend.'

Jessie knew she was referring to Tom. Even though it had been months since Jessie had seen him last, and then been stood up, she still thought about him. Rose, who must have been told the story by Robert, sometimes mentioned 'a new boyfriend' with a strange look in her eye as though she was trying to catch Jessie out. This wasn't the first time that her mother had probed her about him.

'I wouldn't two-time Max.' Another lie. In truth she was beginning to tire of Max's sombre moods and their joyless dates. The girls at work always seemed to be going out and having fun and she was jealous. The truth hit home one day when Sally cracked one of her jokes and the sound of her own laughter made Jessie realise how little she had done that lately. She couldn't remember exactly when she and Max had stopped laughing together.

'Well, don't hang around afterwards,' said Rose, her voice cutting through Jessie's thoughts. 'You know what it's like out there at the moment.'

'We're not Jewish, Mum,' she said, fed up with hearing about it. 'It's those poor sods who're trembling in their boots.'

'Oh, I don't know so much. One of the lads along the road got a terrible beating from a group of Jewish lads – and just for chalking on the wall.'

'I can't say I'm surprised. You must 'ave seen what they [redacted].'

'All the same, that's no reason to break his nose.'

'I don't know any more,' murmured Jessie. 'The more I hear about it, the more confused I get.' She swung her legs off the bed and slipped on her shoes. 'Anyway, I'll be all right, don't worry.'

'The chap on the wireless said that the fog was going to get worse tonight, pea soup time again. Remember to take a torch just in case and take your smog scarf or you'll be sneezing black tonight.'

When Rose had gone, Jessie clenched her hands and gritted her teeth. Why oh why did her mother say the same thing every time she went out in the evening when winter was on its way? Surely she realised that anyone would want to wrap up against the bitter weather.

On her way out, Jessie looked in on Robert, reading his newspaper in the parlour. 'I won't be late home, Dad,' she said. 'Keep the fire burning.'

'Ah, Jessie. I wanted to have a quiet word.'

'Oh. Must it be now?'

'I've been thinking,' he said, his brow furrowed, 'about you and Max.' He locked his fingers together and sucked on his teeth, something he was inclined to do when giving his children advice. 'I think it might be best if you weren't seen out together for a while.'

Jessie couldn't believe her ears. He was the last person she thought would say that. 'But if we all stop mixing with our Jewish friends in public, that'd mean Mosley was winning surely.'

'I'm not saying you shouldn't see him, just don't go walking out together till things calm down. Max can come round here sometimes and you go to his house. The nights are drawing in and you don't know who'll be lurking in alleyways armed with coshes, and in the present mood girls like you will be tarred with the same brush, in a manner of speaking. I'm not saying this just because Max is Jewish – he's a Red as well.'

'No he's *not*. Max might go on about it but a Communist? He's not that political, Dad. What made you think that?'

'It's what they're saying down the docks, Jessie, about the majority of the Jews, that they've united with the Communists for strength. Be careful, that's all I'm saying, and get Max to stay in the background for a while.' Robert turned back to his paper.

On her way to the bus stop, Jessie had to admit that her father had a point. There was an atmosphere of pending trouble. She'd passed four pubs on her way and although they were lit up, there wasn't much noise of talking or singing coming from them and she hadn't heard anyone playing the piano. And it wasn't just the men who were standing on street corners in groups, everyone seemed to be out that evening, street walkers, tram and bus drivers, conductors, cabbies. It was as if the East End was a place waiting for something to happen. Expecting it.

Crossing the Mile End Road she saw several more groups of people standing around, so she paused for a moment to properly observe what was going on. Couples were strolling hand in hand, small groups of men, small groups of women, all going in the same direction – towards the People's Palace.

There were no placards or patriotic flags, so it couldn't be a demonstration. Since she was going that way, catching a bus which would take her from the Mile End, down Grove Road and on to Victoria Park, Jessie slowed down. There was a different and strange mood in the air. A mood of defence rather than attack, of intrigue rather than fear, and it all seemed calm and controlled as more people arrived from side streets. A clock above a pawnbroker's showed it had just turned seven.

Debating whether to go on walking with the crowd or wait at the stop for her bus, Jessie caught a glimpse of a figure she thought she recognized. It was Tom. Unlike other couples who were enjoying each other's company, he didn't have his arm round the girl he was walking with and he wasn't holding her hand; they were simply strolling along together. Throwing back his head and laughing, Tom glanced behind him at another couple who were enjoying a quip and in that split second his and Jessie's eyes met.

His first reaction was disbelief, but then, with some hesitation, he waved her over. Surprising herself, Jessie made her way through the crowds towards him. As she drew near, a cloud of

concern swept across his face as he looked from the girl beside him to Jessie.

'Hello, Jessie,' he said, greeting her as if they were old chums. 'This is my friend Hannah. Hannah, this is the girl I was telling you about. The one I met outside Stepney Green station in the summer.'

'Late spring,' said Jessie, correcting him, 'after you'd just pinched someone's cap.' She smiled to suit her mood. She felt very pleased to see him and ready to put him firmly in his place.

'I'm glad to meet you.' Hannah held out her hand, which came as a surprise. East End girls didn't shake hands, but Jessie responded as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

'Tom stopped talking about you,' said Hannah, smiling, 'so I presumed it had fizzled out.'

'There was nothing to fizzle, Hannah. Tom's manners aren't as good as yours. He stood me up. Sent someone else in his place – on a date, a foursome. A gentleman he is not!'

With a knowing smile, Hannah glanced at Tom and shook her head. 'You coward.'

'Coward?' said Jessie, unsure if she'd just been insulted. 'What makes you say that?'

'Tom believed it was love at first sight – you must have scared the life out of him.'

'All right, Hannah. That's enough,' said Tom, taking com-

'Why don't you walk with us?' Hannah glanced over Jessie's shoulder. 'Or are you with someone?'

'No. I'm by myself and just happened to be passing. What's going on?' Jessie looked at the crowds.

'You mean you don't know? And you really were just passing?'

'I'm on my way to somewhere else, to see a relative. Is it a demonstration?' Jessie sensed Tom's eyes burning into her and could feel herself blushing.

'I suppose you could say it's a demonstration, yes,' said Hannah, who was only too pleased to fill Jessie in on the details. It had been rumoured that Oswald Mosley would speak at the People's Palace, he would explain what his intentions were and had always been, and tell the Jewish community that he was not out for their blood as some of the press would have them believe. 'It's just another bit of Fascist propaganda to gain more members,' said Hannah.

'Come on, Hannah,' urged Tom. 'If we don't get moving we'll end up at the back of the crowd.'

'Tom thought it would be nice to go for a stroll on this crisp October evening, and I thought he meant just that. We were going to walk all the way to the Tower and have a drink in his favourite pub. I put on my best red hat for the occasion.'

Jessie was quite struck with Hannah; she seemed very natural and Jessie felt easy in her company. Glancing at her not-so-fashionable grey coat, Jessie saw that she was wearing a small clip-on brooch very similar to the one that Rose had given to her.

At the People's Palace, Jessie and Hannah chatted on while Tom kept himself to himself, looking around, hoping to catch a glimpse of the infamous Mosley. He was surprised at the number of people who had turned out. Hannah suddenly let out a low, despairing groan. 'Of course *she* would be here. I should have known. She said she was going to see a friend – she doesn't have friends, she has comrades.'

'Who?' asked Jessie.

'My mother. Her over there, in black. She tells people she wears that colour because she is still in mourning for my father – who is not dead.' There was a pause as Jessie tried to take in her strange remark. 'She is so conniving,' Hannah went on. 'She didn't tell me about Mosley coming because she wanted Tom to be here and knew I would try and stop him. But Tom is the one being tricked here.'

Tom scowled. 'Shut up for five minutes, Hannah. You can talk some things to death, you know.'

Quietly laughing at him she said, 'Mosley's not going to be here, she just wanted you to come and listen to one of his lapdogs. She tricked you.'

'And how would you know that?'

'Because, Tom, it would have made front-page news.'

'You're wrong there. Why do you think this many have turned out? Because there are no police around, that's why. He kept it a secret from the press. Let it be known by word of mouth.'

Again Hannah laughed at him. 'I told you it was more propaganda.' She pulled his jacket sleeve. 'Come on, we'll make our way to the Tower through the back streets. I don't want to get involved in this.'

'Don't be a silly girl, Hannah. It's a free country, we'll walk where we want. I want to take *this* route to the Tower and have a drink in my favourite pub on the way.'

'We can do that on the way back! They'll be gone by then. Please, Tom, I'm sick to death of listening to them. I know that's who it will be on the platform, one of Mosley's puppets.'

'According to some of the newspapers,' said Tom, distracted, 'Mosley's not as anti-Semitic as you've had me believe. He wants a great future for Britain, that's all.'

'Ah. So she finally got through to you then?' Hannah sighed. 'I knew she would, in the end.'

'Like I said, some of the news reports—'

'From *some* of the newspapers,' Jessie chimed in, to remind them she was there. 'It depends which newspaper you read.'

'You tricked me into coming out for this walk,' said Hannah. 'Why, Tom? Why do you need me by your side?'

'I never tricked you. I fancied a walk to the Tower and, yes, Gerta did mention this was scheduled and I thought I might find it interesting. So, yeah, I'm blacking my nose. Nothing wrong with that, is there? Hannah? Oh, for Christ's sake. *Now* what?' Hannah was staring past him at the platform.

'I was wrong, Tom.' She had spotted the banner, the

bodyguards and the man. Mosley *was* making a brief appearance. 'You will see the man in the flesh after all.'

Before either Tom or Jessie could get a good view of him, Mosley was off the platform again and into his chauffeur-driven limousine which was standing by with its engine running. All they saw of the man was the back of his head as the car sped away.

'Well, you could hardly call that an appearance.' Hannah was laughing again. 'He was here long enough for his publicity agents to take photographs of him with the crowd. Now can we go?'

'Be quiet for five minutes, Hannah,' Tom said, irritated. The rapturous applause mixed with catcalls and whistling was deafening as one of Mosley's men stepped up onto the platform to give a speech, his henchmen surrounding him.

'Come on, Tom, we can cut through the back doubles to Commercial Road.' Hannah looked and sounded nervous. 'We'll make our way to the Tower from there, or make our way back home. There's going to be trouble this evening, I can smell it in the air.'

'Don't talk daft. You go back if you're that worried. I want to have a butchers at the man. Take Jessie with you . . .' He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then pushed his hand through his hair, worried. 'No, on second thoughts, didn't you say you were going somewhere else, Jess?'

'Yes. I am, when I'm good and ready. Don't worry, I won't be hanging around here for much longer. This is not my idea of an evening out.'

'If you're really this interested, Tom,' said Hannah, 'I promise to let you know another time when Mosley actually is going to give a talk. I promise. This is not a good time.' Hannah's anxiety began to make Jessie feel edgy too.

'I want to stay and listen to the speech, that's all. Just listen to what this man's got to say. I'm not gullible, if I think he's talking a load of rot, I'll say so.' Tom grinned and winked at Jessie. 'Free speech. Mine. He should admire that.'

Resigned, Hannah linked arms with him. 'It'll look better if we appear to be a friendly threesome just passing by. Take his other arm, Jessie.'

Jessie did so, for the fun of it and to annoy him, but Tom wasn't annoyed, his sideways glance at her showed his interest in her. Squeezing her hand, he said, 'Stop worrying, you've got a bodyguard.'

'I can't stay long,' said Jessie, warming to him. 'I've got a date.'

Tom laughed quietly. 'So you said, with a relative. An old grandma?' He couldn't have known how right he was.

'Not one Communist,' murmured Hannah, studying the crowd for familiar faces. 'This spells trouble. They must have gathered elsewhere, ready to make a grand entrance. I wonder which route they'll take.'

'Stop *worrying*,' said Tom.

'Well, I'm going home. I don't think you should hang around either, Jessie, I really don't.' Hannah turned to leave but Tom was too quick for her and grabbed her round her waist.

'You're not going anywhere. I need you to tell me who's who.' With his arm firmly gripping her, Tom pleaded, 'Ten minutes, that's all, then you can go.'

The man on the platform began to speak and Tom lifted himself to full height and listened intently while Hannah continually looked around for the first sign of trouble.

'Soon the others will come,' she murmured, 'like small opposing armies. The Reds, the Jews and an army of Blackshirts, dressed to intimidate. Those already here are mostly sightseers and people like you, Tom, on the brink of joining up.'

Jessie looked from Tom's serious, attentive face to the speaker who was dressed in a light-coloured suit, with black shirt and black tie. Tall, broad and erect, he was an attraction for the women, and there were several young women in the crowd. Mosley's men, like himself, had become heroes and heart-throbs

to some as Rudolph Valentino and Clark Gable had to others, and this speaker was on good form:

'Sir Oswald Mosley counts it a privilege to live in an age when England demands that great things shall be done! A privilege to be of the generation which learns to say what we can give instead of what can we take! For thus our generation learns there are greater things than slothful ease; greater things than safety; more terrible things than death.

'Hold high the head of England; lift strong the voice of Empire! Let us to Europe and to the world proclaim that the heart of this great people is undaunted and invincible. This flag still challenges the winds of destiny! This flame still burns! This glory shall not die. The soul of Empire is alive, and England again dares to be great!'

'Oh yeah?' The voice of an old East Ender filled the calculated silence. 'Once you've kicked out the Jews and anyone not pretty enough to be at your party!' This brought laughter.

'Sir, anti-Semitism was never our policy! We never attacked the Jews as a people. We never attack any man on account of race or religion, and we never shall. From the very outset we have preserved the principle of no racial or religious persecution. The fact that Jews enjoy an excessive influence in British—'

'So what do you want then?' yelled another. 'What is it you're getting at? 'Cos I'm blowed if I understand your fancy talk. Speak as you find, sir. I'm a plain man. So give me some plain talk – if you can.'

'I will do my best, sir. Firstly, Blackshirts were hired for one reason and one reason only, to protect meetings from Communists and the Jews who attacked our Olympia meeting and have often been responsible for groundless assaults upon our members—'

'Yeah, yeah, we know all that! We wanna know why you're 'ere and what you want. What d'you want to do for this country and for us? What're you about, sir?'

'A fair question. We ask those who join us to march

with us in a great and hazardous adventure. We ask them to dedicate their lives to building in this country a movement of the modern age, which by its British expression shall transcend, as often before in our history, every precursor of the continent in conception and in constructive achievement. We ask—'

'Waffle!' yelled one of the crowd. 'The man was asking for answers, not claptrap. Tell us what's needed and what you intend to do!' There were both favourable and unfavourable responses from the crowd. Hannah felt sure there were people planted among the crowd to provoke conflict.

'What d'yer want the British people to do? And tell us why we should do it!' shouted a younger man.

'We must strive to continue to reduce unemployment figures! Improve economic conditions and social conditions! Deter a party controlled by Communists! Communism destroys all honour and trust among men, even within its own party.' The speaker paused for a few seconds to allow that thought to soak into the people's minds.

'The tactics are always the same,' said Hannah. 'I've seen this act so many times it makes my stomach turn. It's a well-planned speech.'

Jessie leaned forward and whispered in her ear, 'Are *you* a Blackshirt, Hannah?'

She whispered back, 'Yes. I have a tyrant for a mother. She forced me to join. Talk to Tom. Do what you can to persuade him to leave here now, before the trouble starts.'

Jessie studied Tom's face, he was hanging on every word the man was saying so what could she possibly do to make him leave? She would wait five minutes more and then slip away. She had, after all, another more important meeting to attend. She was going to find her grandmother. Her thoughts drifted away from the immediate scene as the speaker's voice rang out into the October evening.

'Many of the typically English characters among the Communists have come over to us. And for good reason, one being

that the Blackshirt movement is the only guarantee of free speech in Britain—'

'Never mind about free speech! Tell us 'ow you aim to reduce unemployment so we can have some grub on the table! Because that's why most of us are giving you our time of day! You gonna ship out all the foreigners back to their own countries and make this a British Britain? 'Cos if you are, and you're prepared to say so in public, I'll wear the uniform of the Blackshirt! Enough's enough!

'The foreigners are getting all the fucking work! The Jews eat chicken while our families are making do on bread and fucking lard!'

'Come on, Tom,' Hannah pulled at his sleeve. 'He's finished, he's just given the stewards a nod. The seed's been planted and now they'll leave the crowd angry.'

'He's not going anywhere before he answers my questions – let's see if he'll admit that Mosley's an ally of Hitler.'

'He won't answer, he'll just smile. He's waiting for someone like you to take the bait, I've seen it all before.'

Jessie saw that an army of men were approaching, silently marching, with not one banner or flag to be seen. She nudged Hannah and nodded in their direction.

'I knew it. It's the Communists!' She jerked her hand from Tom's arm, turning quickly to look behind her, and sure enough another lot from the other direction was coming their way. 'And now we have the Jews,' she said.

Jessie thought about Max and the mood he and his friends had been in lately. They could very easily be part of the mob striding towards them. Jessie realised they were sandwiched between Communists and Jews who no doubt believed that all those gathered here were ardent Fascists.

'This is very organised,' murmured Hannah. 'They've got together over this one and no doubt there will be other small splinter groups coming too. Let's hope that the Blackshirts do turn up or we might well be the target here.' She stepped

backwards, a very frightened look on her face. 'Tom. We have to get away from here. *Now*.'

'He's gone – the speaker's bloody well legged it!' Tom was furious. 'I've never seen anyone move so quick!'

'That's because he's seen there's going to be trouble!' snapped Hannah. 'He's no different from any other human being, Tom, except that just like his teacher, Mosley, he's an excellent showman.'

'Mosley's always been for his country though, Hannah, he never changed his spots on that issue. I've been doing my homework.'

'Listening to my mother, you mean. She's *hypnotised* you.'

'Nuts! I can work things out for myself. What that speaker had to say made sense. I—'

A milk bottle flew through the air and just missed Tom's head. Within seconds there were more sounds of smashing glass and shouts of abuse as well as screams from the women present, and both the Communists and the Jews were storming towards them.

'Where is the army of Blackshirts to protect us now?' said Hannah. 'I told you, this was a calculated plan to show the Reds and the Jews in a very bad light. The press will have a field day.'

Above the noise of the crowd came the voice of a young Jewish man who was no more than a couple of feet away. 'Bastard Blackshirts!' Turning to confront him, Tom was met by a heavy fist which sent him reeling backwards and down onto the pavement, bleeding and shocked.

His immediate response was to scream at the girls to run, but they were too stunned to move. Forcing himself to his knees, the blood pouring from his mouth, he shouted, 'Run, Jessie, run!'

Too terrified to react, she just stood there as if in a daze. It was Hannah who reached out and grabbed her arm, wrenching her away and yelling at her to run fast. Her heart pounding as

if it would burst, Jessie felt the same fear as she had in Cable Street with her brothers.

They pushed and shoved their way through the angry fighting crowds. They sped through the back streets, under arches and through alleyways. They ran until they had to stop. Leaning on the wall of a local school, not one word passed between them until their breathing became more normal and their hearts stopped thumping as if they would burst.

'I have such a stitch in my side, Jessie,' gasped Hannah.

'Me too!'

'We needn't have run this far, we could have walked once we were out of danger.'

'No. I wasn't going to stop running until I had to. Where do you live, Hannah? Is it far from here?'

'No. A five-minute walk, if that.' Hannah pressed her hand to her side and doubled forward. 'My mother won't be in so you can come back if you would like to.'

Jessie took long, slow breaths of air. 'I would love a cup of tea . . . after a glass of water.'

'Me too. Come on. We can walk now.' Hannah held out her hands. They were trembling. 'I've seen what can happen when there's a clash. People will be hurt and I wouldn't be surprised if someone isn't killed. Did you see any police there?'

'No.'

'Precisely. No Blackshirts. No police. This time they even managed to outsmart the law.'

'Who?'

'The Union of Fascists.'

Safe in the flat in Hannah's small kitchen, Jessie took in her surroundings. It was all so clinical, cream and light-green paint, everything scrubbed and not one ornament around to collect dust. Everything had its place, in a cupboard or behind closed doors. This was not a homely kitchen and Jessie couldn't imagine cakes being baked here, ever.

'I hope Tom's all right,' said Hannah, pouring boiling water

into the teapot. 'The people who'd gone to listen were totally outnumbered. Most of them were just ordinary folk, not there for the politics but simply to sightsee and catch a glimpse of Mosley. They were being used like pawns in a chess game. Maybe now Tom will drop any thoughts of joining the Blackshirts and my mother's work will have been a waste of time. She's been trying for years to get him to join up, telling him that it's not the Blackshirts who cause the trouble.'

'Well, he's hardly going to drop it now, is he, Hannah? You said yourself that the Blackshirts didn't turn out, so he'll blame the other factions.' Jessie took a steaming cup of tea gratefully.

'Yes,' Hannah sipped her tea, 'you're right, and the more I tell him the way it really was, the more he'll argue with me. He can be single-minded at times and I'm only a *female*, what do *I* know about anything?'

'More than anyone at that gathering, by the sound of it,' said Jessie, checking her watch. 'I have to go. I'd love to stay longer and find out more about . . . well, about everything.'

'Meaning Tom?'

Jessie couldn't help smiling. 'Are you a mind-reader as well, Hannah?'

'I knew what *you* were thinking,' she said, triumphant. 'Jessie, why don't we meet up sometime for a coffee, or a drink?'

'Good idea, let's do that. I work at the soap factory, in the offices. Give me a pen and paper and I'll write down the phone number. Ask for the wages department, my boss shouldn't mind one call coming in for me.'

'Do you really mean it?' said Hannah, a touch of disbelief in her voice.

'Of course I do. Why shouldn't I?' The girls looked into each other's light blue eyes and a sense of familiarity swept through them both.

'I don't usually make friends this easily,' smiled Hannah.

'Well, it's high time you did.' Jessie leaned back and held her gaze. 'I like you, Hannah. I like you a lot.'

Chapter Four

Jessie tried to push all thoughts of the frightening attack from her mind but she felt that the People's Palace would never be the same again. Stepping down from the bus at Victoria Park, she shuddered against the cold mist in the air which enhanced the aroma of smouldering wood from a garden fire somewhere nearby.

It was eight thirty and the rising full moon broke the darkness, casting shadows behind the trees and catching small leaves as they floated down, adding to the carpet of rust-coloured foliage, not yet raked from the park. Crisp leaves on the wide pavement rustled under her footsteps as she peered at street doors, trying to make out the numbers. Somewhere along this road lived her grandmother.

Her steps slowed as she began to lose her confidence. A voice deep inside her told her that this mission could go badly wrong. Maybe Ingrid Gunter preferred to forget the past, like her daughter Rose. She might find this visit intrusive and upsetting.

Jessie found herself in front of wide steps leading to the front door of the house she was looking for. Without thinking, she brushed her fingers across the face of a rundown, life-size statue of a lion, one of a pair, sitting either side of the dilapidated wrought-iron entrance gate which had not been closed for several

years. Wedged into the earth with its hinges rusting away, it was ready for the rubbish dump. The building itself had been neglected too and was in need of restoration and repair; paint was peeling and there were cracks in the plaster on the lower half of the façade.

Taking a brave, deep breath, Jessie climbed the steps and pulled on the old-fashioned brass bell. Twelve tenants were registered as residents here, some single, some married and some with children, and Jessie felt sure that one of them must be in. The wait seemed like an eternity.

The boy who eventually struggled to open the heavy door was a ten-year-old who looked as if he could do with a good bath and a hot dinner. He peered up at Jessie and narrowed his eyes as if he was seeing light for the first time.

'I'm looking for a Mrs Gunter,' said Jessie, hesitant. 'She's quite old and—'

'The owd German tart that lives dahn the airy?' The boy closed one eye and curled his top lip.

'Well, that might be her . . . unless there's another old lady here, living on her own.'

'Nar, there ain't.' He sniffed and wiped his runny nose with the back of his hand and rubbed it down the side of his oversized trousers. 'You want the old gal in the pit. She ain't a witch, is she?'

'I don't think so,' said Jessie, half smiling. 'Why do you ask?'

'Dunno.' He lifted one leg off the floor and broke wind. 'Go dahn an' bang on the door. The bell don't work and she's a bit mutt and jeff.' He slammed the door in her face and shouted from behind it, 'Now fuck off!'

Jessie went down the worn steps that led to the basement flat, half expecting a mouse to run across her feet. Some litter had blown or been thrown into the airy but other than that it was all quite clean. Bracing herself, she knocked on the door and waited. The door opened before she had time to think about changing

her mind. It opened soundlessly, no eerie creaking, no stale dank smell, no dark passage, no bent, witch-like old woman. Instead she looked into the fresh and intelligent face of someone she almost recognised. Ingrid Gunter had similar features to Rose and the same searching eyes.

'Yes? What do you want?' Although to the point, Ingrid had a soft, quiet voice and Jessie could detect the German inflection. She stood erect, her chin pushed forward, her eyes alert and not full of misery as Jessie had imagined. Her silver hair was pulled back into a neat bun and her clothes, dark and simple, had no creases. The lace-edged collar on her grey dress was snow-white and Jessie could smell the faint aroma of lavender. The woman didn't look as if she belonged in a basement flat in Hackney but in a thatched cottage in the country surrounded by orchards and rose gardens.

'I'm Jessie,' she said, smiling nervously. 'Jessie Warner.' She looked into her grandmother's face and saw her changing expression. 'I don't suppose the name means anything—'

'It means nothing to me.' Jessie was sure Ingrid Gunter knew exactly who she was, she had answered too quickly. 'You have the wrong house.' Ingrid stepped back and began to close the door but Jessie put the flat of her hand against it.

'Please, let me come in. I can tell that you know who I am. I won't stay long and I won't ask too many questions, I promise. Just give me a few minutes of your time, that's all I want.'

The old woman looked at her with a piercing gaze. 'Did she *die*? Is that why you've come? To tell me she's dead?'

'No. My mother doesn't know anything about this, no one knows. I did it of my own accord. I wanted to find you.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.' Jessie waited as the seconds ticked by and the old woman decided whether or not to let her in.

'And *nobody* knows you are here?'

'Nobody. Cross my heart.'

Ingrid's tension seemed to dissolve. She nodded and stood

to one side. 'Go through.' She possessed a quiet dignity. 'All the way to the end of the corridor and into the sitting room.'

In the small, comfortable room, Jessie at once felt easy. Memories of her grandfather washed over her. There was a dark, polished, carved sideboard, a small feather-cushioned settee and two old, comfortable-looking armchairs. There was nothing modern in the room except for a Clarice Cliff tea set and an orange, red and black vase filled with fresh flowers. A few patchwork cushions were scattered on the settee and there was a new cream Bakelite wireless under the wall lights which had lovely pale green and cranberry glass shades.

A small coal fire burned in the fireplace, and on the black iron trivet sat a kettle of water, from which steam was wisping out of the spout. The apartment, unlike Jessie's home, had already been wired for electricity, yet Ingrid Gunter still used the fire to boil the kettle. The walls had old-fashioned fading wallpaper on which hung some framed photographs and a collection of miniature paintings. The scent of beeswax polish reminded Jessie of home and there was a delicious smell of baking coming from the kitchen.

'Please, take a seat.' Ingrid waited until Jessie lowered herself into an armchair before she herself sat down in the chair opposite. 'You are young and will want to ask questions. I am old and will not want to answer them. Say what you have come to say and then you must go.'

Her forthright manner reminded Jessie of Dolly. 'I found out where you were living, through the records office.'

'Why? Why should you want to find me? I am not a part of your mother's family now or your life so why should you come here?'

'You're my grandmother.'

'Ha. It could be said.' She picked up a polished brass poker and prodded the glowing coals in the fire. 'I suppose your curiosity was aroused when your grandfather died. Something was said and you latched on to it. Too young to be wise. It must

have been fun to discover you had a grandmother who had been kept in the dark. It gave you something to do. Dig up a bit of the past. Well, I hope your thirst for intrigue has been quenched. I'm not dead. What will you do now for a pastime?'

Whether she meant to or not, she was fuelling Jessie's passion, she wanted to know more. 'How did you know he'd died?'

Her grandmother paused, as though wondering how much she should reveal. Then she said slowly, 'The authorities. He was still my husband, according to the law. As far as I was concerned he died years ago.' There was a short pause as the clock ticked loudly. 'What if I tell you that I don't like callers?'

'I'm not a caller, I'm your flesh and blood. Did you have any more children?'

'No.' She turned away from Jessie's searching eyes and gazed at the floor. 'No. The love a mother has for her child is almost too much. Once is enough.' She went quiet again. 'My brother had beautiful children and now he has beautiful grandchildren. I see them often. They are my family.'

'That cake in the oven smells lovely,' said Jessie. It sounded cheeky but she was actually trying to remind Ingrid of it because there was a slight smell of burning coming from the kitchen.

'Yes. The cake.' The old woman pulled herself up from the armchair and went into the small kitchen. 'Would you prefer tea to coffee?'

'I don't mind,' Jessie called back, surprised at the offer.

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me a hand.' A second invitation, and from someone who didn't want to spend much time with her.

'The cake did not burn. I've left the oven door just open. In a moment, perhaps you would lift it out for me while I grind the coffee beans.'

Jessie glanced around the small, neat kitchen. Everything was in its place, pretty cups and saucers were displayed on a small kitchen dresser and on the white enamel surface, in a corner,

sat two of everything from a plain blue dinner service – her everyday crockery. One set for herself and one set should she have a visitor. There were lace curtains at the kitchen window and across the back door which opened on to the garden. The floor was covered with bright blue linoleum with small red squares.

Jessie watched fascinated as the graceful woman spooned coffee beans into her iron grinder. 'I don't think I've tasted real coffee, we always have Camp. I'm not sure about Joe Lyons, the coffee there does taste different but—'

'I doubt that Joe Lyons has time to grind the beans himself but I'm sure he would use good coffee and charge for it.'

Jessie lifted the fruit cake out of the oven and placed it on the draining board to cool. 'This looks delicious.'

'The sugar bowl is in that cupboard. It's dark brown sugar, you may not like it but I don't use white.'

'I love dark brown sugar, we always have it at Christmas time. Mum lets us scoop out the flesh from an orange and fill it with sugar. Once it's been sitting for a week she lets us eat some of it, before we chop up the peel for the puddings.'

Ingrid spooned ground coffee into her percolator. 'I suppose you will boast to your mother that you have found out about me and where I live.'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

'If *I* don't want? Since when did what *I* want matter? How much do you know about Mr Gunter and myself?'

'That he left you and it made him sad, that my grandfather, who I loved *very much*, was besotted by *her* until he realised his mistake and missed someone. You.'

'You seem to have known him well. Did you despise him for what he did to me?'

'No. I could never despise him, we were quite close.'

'You must have been special to have managed that. Here,' she handed Jessie an oven glove, 'bring in the kettle of boiled water from off the fire – and try not to scald yourself.'

Obeying her instructions, Jessie carried on talking, raising

her voice a little. 'He never mentioned you or said anything about what had happened, but once I found out, after he died, I realised he must have sometimes been thinking about you when I was there.'

'And how could you know what he was thinking?' she said, taking the kettle from Jessie. 'You would have to be very smart to have seen inside Mr Gunter's mind.'

'I was the only one in the family who sat with him. Sometimes we'd talk but mostly we'd sit and be quiet. He would have told me to go home if he hadn't wanted me there. He was like that.'

Ingrid asked Jessie to carry the tray, laden with coffee and warm cake, into the sitting room. 'From what age did you visit him?'

'Always, right from when I was a scruffy urchin.' Jessie set the tray down on the small occasional table and watched as her grandmother cut two slices of cake.

'I doubt you were ever scruffy or an urchin.'

'Do you know what he mostly ate?' said Jessie, enjoying the memory. 'Slices of sharp cooking apple, a piece of cheese—'

'And raw onion,' the old woman finished for her. 'I can't pretend that I'm not pleased now that I've got over the shock of seeing you on my doorstep but don't take my hospitality to mean that I want you to come and go when it takes your fancy.'

'I wouldn't do that. My parents taught us to have good manners, not that Dolly or Alfie always practise it but at least they *know* when they're being bad-mannered. Grandfather wouldn't have stood for my coming and going either.'

Ingrid tensed at another mention of him. 'We'll drink our coffee and eat cake together and then I would like you to leave. Meanwhile I would prefer it if there was no further talk of that man. Willy Gunter has much to answer for. He did wrong and God would not have forgiven him – and he will have known that, which is why he had the worried look you refer to.'

'I didn't say worried, I said sad.'

'He had his Maker to face and I don't envy his last few minutes before death. He knew he had wronged me. I was a good, hard-working, faithful wife, and doting mother. I did not deserve what he gave me in return, the pain and the loneliness, the worst kind of suffering for someone who has lost her family. It's not good to love too deeply. Once, he did love me, yes, but not after he met the Gypsy whore. You shouldn't make excuses for him or try to justify what he did. Leave me something at least. I was the victim so I may curse him. Hating is easier than loving.'

Jessie sipped her coffee and found the silence strange; it was as if everything had been said and yet there were so many things to discover about her grandmother. She wanted to ask about Rose and what she was like as a small child, but that would have to wait until another visit.

'You should eat the cake while it's still quite warm, that way you will taste the fruit.'

'Mum always makes us wait until it's cooled down. She says it's not good for the digestion if—'

'That's because she's had English housewives to listen to instead of her own mother, and for that you may thank your beloved grandfather.'

'I know it's not much help now,' Jessie broke off a small piece of her cake, 'but I'm sure he regretted what he'd done and I know he wasn't happy with Grandmother Blake. He wasn't in his grave five minutes before she had another man move in.'

'He got what he deserved. When he left me I had no money and a child to bring up. He changed his name so that I could not trace him. I had no choice but to put my daughter into the orphans' home. I could have found him if I wanted, but I would not beg, I would never beg. I managed by myself, scrubbing thick grease from kitchen floors, always with the thought that I would one day get back my little girl. Then I discovered he'd taken her away from the home and I gave up. He had taken everything. When he took my child he left me with nothing.'

'I thought he changed his name because of the resentment in the East End – against Germans,' murmured Jessie, ashamed of what she was hearing.

'So that was his story? Ah well, it made my life easier not having to worry about my child's welfare. I trusted the Romany to look after her.' She raised her eyes and looked straight at Jessie. 'Was she a good mother?'

'Mum was fed and clothed, but I don't think she was loved. She grew up thinking that her real mother didn't want her.'

'Well, well. Aren't you a glowing light. I will sleep much better knowing that. What I could never understand ... is why your mother repeated what had happened to herself. She gave away your sister. Times were hard for her, of course they were, but—'

'She never gave away my sister! Dolly lives with us. She's always lived with us. Mum wouldn't give one of us away. Who told you that?'

Ingrid's eyes clouded over and her face showed her remorse. 'My brother has been bringing me tales for years, he doesn't live far from where you are and thinks it his duty to bring me news. As usual he got it wrong and I apologise.' She looked very uncomfortable. 'I'm weary now, you have tired me with your questions.'

'It's time I was getting back home anyway, they forecast fog, and there's been a lot of trouble round our way between gangs.'

Rising, Ingrid shook her head. 'Mosley is a foolish man who is causing trouble which could have a devastating affect on this country.'

At the front door, she said, 'Please try to understand that I am better off being left in peace. I've put the past behind me. Don't tell your mother that you came. As far as I am concerned I have no family and that is how I prefer it.'

Jessie found that very hard to believe. 'Surely you'd like to

see your only daughter again. She'd come, I know she would, once I explained what—'

'After thirty-three years? I don't think so. You are young and fanciful and I'm sorry to dash your romantic notions. Had she have wanted to, like you, she could have tracked me down a very long time ago.' Ingrid looked up at the sky and frowned. 'I think the forecast is right. Be home before that blanket of fog begins to fall.'

Jessie didn't want to leave things there, it seemed too final. 'How come you know so much about us if you weren't interested?'

'My brother keeps me informed whether I like it or not.' She nodded her goodbye and the expression on her face forbade Jessie to ask anything else. Then Ingrid smiled weakly and closed the door.

Jessie leaned against the wall to collect her thoughts. Her grandmother had not shed one tear. Did she really not care? Jessie didn't believe it.

The sound of a man's voice from inside startled her. 'You were very hard on her, Ingrid! Too hard. She is just an innocent child!' It must be Ingrid Gunter's brother; he had presumably decided to keep out of the way until she left.

'I don't want to *hear* it!' Jessie flinched at the misery in Ingrid's voice. 'You hated my husband for what he did to me, so hate his offspring . . . *and* his offspring's children! That girl is nothing to us. *Nothing!* We must forget she ever came!' Ingrid's voice dropped to a pitiful tone. 'We must forget. I've lived without them, I will die without them.'

There was a quiet moment and then Ingrid spoke again. She sounded like a different woman. 'He did love me, you know . . .'

'I know, Ingrid, I know. Try to remember the good times.'

'My only child, Wilhelm, my only baby. We could have brought her up, we could have managed between us. Do you

see what happened? She repeated the actions of her own mother. Do you see, Wilhelm? Do you *see*?'

'Shush. You have my family, Ingrid. My children adore you, you know they do. You have a family with us. We'll forget she ever came.'

Jessie arrived home exhausted and ready for her bed; too much had happened in one day. Hoping her parents were too involved with a programme on the wireless to start asking questions about the William Morris exhibition, Jessie went into the house very quietly. She'd had enough for one day and wasn't in the mood for trumping up a pack of lies about the Whitechapel Art Gallery and the exhibition. It would be much easier to deal with it in the morning over breakfast when everyone was in too much of a hurry to show interest.

Creeping along the passage, Jessie was surprised to hear laughter and conversation coming from the sitting room and recognised the voice of one of her uncles, her father's brother – the family orator. The family bore. She also recognised another uncle and an aunt. The Warners had paid a surprise visit.

Since Dolly was out and the boys were asleep in bed, she would have to go in for a few minutes and make polite conversation – it would be expected. Jessie knew the form. She ran the usual questions through in her mind: how was life treating her; had she received promotion at work yet; was there an engagement in the air; which author was she reading these days ...

Slipping quietly into the sitting room, she sat on a low stool, thankful that they were engrossed, or at least pretending to be interested in what her dad had to say. Glancing at the detached expressions on their faces, Jessie felt sorry for her parents; the Warners had never been interested in their lives or what happened at the docks.

Her eyes rested on Rose, who was sitting in the upright green velvet chair doing her best to look the part expected of

her. Jessie longed to tell her where she had been and who she had found; she wanted her to know that she looked just like her own mother and she wanted to hold her very close and tell her what a lovely woman Ingrid Gunter was, a lovely old lady with as much pride as her daughter.

Sensing Jessie's eyes on her, Rose looked across at her, a puzzled expression on her face, her eyes full of questions. It was as if she knew what Jessie was thinking and where she had been.

'So I'll be testing it tomorrow,' Robert's voice broke through Jessie's thoughts. 'I don't think my crane'll take it and I've said as much, but I'll do it.'

'Testing what, Dad?' said Jessie.

'My crane. They think they know best. Extra load? It's asking for trouble, but that's the way it's going now. They want us to do more work in less time, Jessie.'

'You can refuse though, can't you?'

'Refuse? I should think not. There are too many men ready to slip into my driving seat. No. I'll do as I'm told and we'll just have to see who's right.' He tapped his pipe on the edge of the black iron grate in the fireplace and smiled at her. Turning to Rose he winked. 'If anything should go wrong, I just want red roses and don't go in black.' Polite laughter greeted this and Jessie excused herself, saying she had to be up extra early in the [redacted].

Closing the door behind her and allowing a long relieved sigh to escape, she was surprised to see Stephen sitting on the stairs, elbows resting on knees, hands under chin. Her heart went out to him – he looked lonely. 'Stephen? You should be asleep by now. What's the matter?' She sat down with him and kissed the top of his head. 'Who's upset you this time?'

'No one. There's nothing the matter.'

'Yes there is. I can tell. Come on, silly, out with it.'

'They keep taking the mickey out of me at school, calling me names.' He stared out, as if he was in a world of

his own. 'Now I've been put at the back of the class and it's worse.'

'What kind of names?'

'Daffadown Dilly, Simple Simon, Silly Boy Blue . . .'

'But you're not simple, Stephen, far from it. You're much cleverer than Alfie and he's older than you. Come to that, you've got more up top than Dolly.'

'I know that. She lives in the past and never finks about the future. Mum said so.'

'Lives for the minute, more like. Well then what is it? Are you being lazy at school? Not learning your tables or spellings? Is that what it is?'

'No. I can't see what's written on the blackboard and now I've been put at the back with the dunce so it's worse.'

'Ah well, it sounds like you might need specs.'

'No! That'll make things worse. More names. I'd rather drown myself then wear those things, or cut my throat on Dad's razor, or put my head in the gas oven. Or—'

'Yeah, all right, you've made your point.' She tried not to laugh at him and tousled his hair, keeping a serious tone to her voice. 'Well, we'll just have to get Mum to have a quiet word with your teacher. Then she'll move you down the front and no one need know why you've been put there. Now stop fretting over that and listen. I've got a secret that I shouldn't tell.'

'A real secret or somefing and nothing?'

'A real secret and you're not to tell a soul. Promise me you won't.'

'God's honour,' he said.

'Come on then, into my room. I take it Alfie's asleep in bed.'

'No. He's gone out. Through the bedroom window. He'll get killed if Mum or Dad finds out. He's put stuff under the quilt to make it look like he's under the covers, asleep.'

'Oh God. Don't you ever think of copying Alfie, will you?

He's heading for trouble, make no mistake. Do you know where he's gone?'

'Yep.' Pleased with himself Stephen bounced up the stairs and into the girls' bedroom and lay on Jessie's bed, hands behind his head, skinny legs crossed. 'He's gone to chalk words on a wall with his mates.'

Her heart sank. 'What words?' As if she didn't know.

'Down with the Jews. 'Im and his mates are getting sixpence each for doing it, a man's paying 'em. Don't know who he is though. Fancy getting a tanner for chalking on the wall. It's the same man who gave Alfie a knife to look after.'

A wave of dread shot through Jessie. My God, she thought, it's as if we're all leading double lives.

'It's all right, Jess, isn't it . . . about the knife?'

'Course it is. I dare say Alfie bought it with his ill-gotten cash but fobbed you off with that story about a man. Unless there's more that you're not telling me?'

'Not really,' he said, sorry to disappoint her – and himself.

'Good. I tell you what, Stephen, on Friday, pay day, I'll give you sixpence for not chalking on the wall. And don't ever mention this to Max – about Alfie. He'd be really hurt.'

'You won't tell Dad, will you? Alfie'd kill me. So would his mates.'

Jessie smiled. 'No, sweetheart, I won't tell, but let me know when he's going again and I'll follow him, pretend I just happened to be out for a walk, then I'll clip him round the ear and his friends too.'

'But you won't call a copper?'

'No, I won't do that. No need. I've a feeling Alfie will draw their attention soon enough. Now then, wait till you hear this. Grandmother Blake is not our real grandmother.'

'So?'

'Oh. It doesn't bother you then?'

'No. She don't like me anyway. Never smiles or anything.'

'Fair enough. So what about our real grandmother? What if

I told you that that's where I've been. What if I told you that I've found where she lives and Mum doesn't even know that and what's more Mum doesn't even know if she's alive but I do. She's really nice. A proper granny.'

'What, with a silver bun and that?'

'Yep. With silvery-grey hair and soft blue eyes, just like Mum's.'

'Did she give you any presents to bring back?'

'No. She's a granny not a fairy godmother. She lives really close to Victoria Park, near the boating lake.'

'Has she got her own boat?' Stephen asked.

'Tch, she's not rich, Stephen, she's—'

'Poor?'

'No! She's just *normal*. Like us.'

'The kids at school say we're rich 'cos Mum's got a shop and Dad's got a job.'

'Well, I suppose we are, compared to most. Not rich, but not poor. Do you want to come with me next time, to see her?' Jessie looked at him eagerly.

'Dunno.' He looked doubtful.

'Oh, right. I'll take Alfie instead.'

That decided him. 'All right then, I'll come. When we going? Tomorrow?'

'No. In a few weeks' time.'

'A few weeks! That's ages away. Why did you tell me now? Now I'll have to wait. I can't wait all that time.'

'In *two* weeks then. We'll give her time to get over the shock of this visit. She didn't know who I was at first, she lives on her own but her brother visits. Just think, Stephen, she's our mum's mum, her *real* mum. Don't you think it's good that we've found her?'

'Dunno.'

Pulling her pillow from under his head, Jessie playfully hit him with it. 'You don't know nuffink, do you?'

'Nope.'

Within seconds Jessie and Stephen were thoroughly enjoying a hardened pillow fight, laughing and shrieking as each of them received blows. The childish fun banished Jessie's worries. Tomorrow was another day and another day meant facing up to all the troubles going on around them, but for now, all that was forgotten and she was happy. Very happy.

Arriving at her desk the next morning five minutes early and still in a good mood, Jessie found Mr Reed keen to know how she had got on in her search. She had hardly had time to take off her coat when he was firing questions at her.

'It's a very long story, Mr Reed,' she chuckled, 'but to cut it short, I went to the address and I found my long lost grandmother.'

'Wonderful, Jessie!' he exclaimed, excited. 'Wonderful! I wish I'd been there to see it. Do you think they'll get together now?'

'I don't know, we'll just have to wait and see.'

Chuffed that he had been of help, Mr Reed got carried away, telling her all about his own family history. 'It's a passion, I suppose. Once you make a start, you just have to go on and on. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if you're not back there soon, Jessie, digging further into the secrets of your family.' He shook his head at the wonder of it. 'Fascinating . . .'

Thankfully, she managed to change the subject at an appropriate pause. A memo, which Jessie had seen on her way into the building, was her excuse. It was pinned to the notice board and had been signed by all three directors. The wording was careful but the message was clear: anyone discovered to have any involvement with the Blackshirt movement risked losing their job. There were quite a few Jewish people working in the factory and in the offices, not to mention the sales reps.

Mr Reed didn't have an opinion, but then, as he openly admitted, he wasn't the least bit interested in politics. 'Each to their own,' he said, 'each to their own.'

'There was trouble again last night, outside the People's Palace,' said Jessie, remembering the ugly scene.

'Exactly my point. Religion and politics, the cause of all ill.'

On her way home from work, smiling to herself, Jessie imagined Mr Reed taking his family on a tour of the Tower of London and behaving like a guide. The smile faded from her face when she saw yet another insult to Jews chalked on the wall at the top of the turning. It was time to have a word with Alfie about this man who had been paying him money to do his dirty work and giving him knives to look after.

Searching through her handbag for her door key, she hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary and it wasn't until she pushed the key into the lock that Jessie realised the Venetian blinds were down. She stared at the windows and felt strangely aware of being watched. She turned round and saw one of the neighbours opposite, leaning against her front door, arms folded and looking very sad. She caught Jessie's eyes and lowered her head.

Crossing the cobblestone road, Jessie asked what had happened and why there was an eerie silence in the street. 'Our blinds are down, Mrs Adams, and your front room curtains are drawn. What's happened?'

The woman couldn't answer; she turned away and went into her house, leaving Jessie to find out for herself. Looking back at the drawn blinds of her house, she knew that something was wrong at home, that something very bad had happened. Walking slowly across the street she knocked on her front door instead of using her key, as a fear stronger than anything she had experienced rose from the pit of her stomach.

It was Dolly who answered the door, Dolly with a red, tear-stained face who stared at Jessie as if she was a stranger and then spoke in a monotone.

'Dad's been killed.'

Jessie stood paralysed, staring back at her sister, waiting.

Waiting for her to smile and say it was only a joke. But it wasn't April Fool's Day and not even Dolly would make such a joke. Jessie opened her mouth to say something but no words came. At last she spoke her sister's name. 'Dolly?'

'Dad's been killed,' she repeated. The house was still and silent, with no sign of movement. 'He's dead, Jessie. Daddy's dead.' She turned and drifted along the passage, away from her, as if she was only a dream.

Jessie went inside and lowered herself onto the fourth stair and sat gazing out at nothing, Dolly's words floating through her mind. *'He's dead, Jessie. Dad's been killed. He's dead, Jessie.'*

The crane. The heavy load.

Her face got colder and tighter by the second as a strange wailing sound rose from deep within her, growing louder and louder until she was screaming. 'No-ooooo! No! No! No!' She punched the stairs over and over and it didn't hurt; she couldn't feel a thing as she went on punching and screaming and punching, until she finally exhausted herself.

Raising her head, she stared at the front door. It hadn't closed properly. She would wait and see for herself whether he came home from work or not, see if Dolly was right. Soon he would come in, smiling and winking at her. She didn't move, just sat, silent and staring.

Nobody came. Nobody touched her. Through her flood of tears she could see the lodgers, standing on the stairs above her, watching. They never moved. They never said a word.

As if in a dream, she walked down to the basement and looked for her mother in the kitchen. She wasn't there. She glanced out of the window into the back garden and there was Rose, wearing the same dress she'd had on that morning and hanging out the washing. Jessie's mother was hanging washing on the line. Her mother was hanging washing on the line and her dad was dead.

Chapter Five

On the morning after the tragedy, the house had an exceptionally tranquil atmosphere. Rose had been up all night and the girls had been drifting about since the crack of dawn. When Dolly had slipped into bed beside Jessie during the night, she had welcomed it. Neither of them had said a word, they just huddled together as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

All three of them coasted silently through the house as if they were in church and slowly got themselves ready to face their first day without Robert. The boys, who had been crying on and off all night, were fast asleep, exhausted.

Rose, pale and red-eyed, made the porridge as usual but none of them ate a morsel, as if eating food was too normal. Several pots of tea had been brewed and thus they did drink, sipping endless cups in silence. None of them mentioned Robert or the accident and when Jessie arrived at work, she could hardly remember having walked to the bus stop or getting on the bus. She had simply arrived here.

As she went into the building, one of the men from the loading bay met her on the stairs. His eyes were downcast as he murmured, 'Never mind, Jessie. We'll all rally round. All of us.'

It was those few kind words which brought reality and

she felt herself go icy-cold again. As he moved past her, she turned to him and whispered, 'Rally round?' Had more time gone by than she'd realised? Wasn't it just yesterday that it had happened. 'My dad?' she murmured, looking into his face. 'You know about that?'

'Bad news travels fast, love. We're all deeply shocked. I never, not in a thousand years, would have expected you to come in today. You didn't have to, you know.'

Nodding and smiling weakly, she backed away up the staircase. George was about the same age as Robert and she thought how like her dad he was. She hadn't noticed before. 'I might go home, George. I don't know.'

'Well, you just get the word through to me and I'll see to it that one of our drivers takes you. One of the women can go with you as well, for the company. You're not on your own with this one, Jessie, we're all behind you.'

'Does everyone know?' she asked, her voice sounding as if it was coming from somewhere else.

'If they don't yet, they will soon. There's a piece in the early editions. There'll be more before the day's out. I should think all the papers will cover it, Jessie, it's an outrage.' He doffed his cap and walked away, shoulders hunched.

The sincerity in his voice and his kind words had touched Jessie but not enough to draw tears. She hadn't cried since Dolly had first told her. Maybe other people were absorbing the grief and anger instead of her. She didn't feel angry. She didn't feel anything. Just numb. It wasn't a bad feeling. It wasn't really a feeling at all.

In the office she was mystified to see a small gathering round Mr Reed's desk. Was it his birthday and he hadn't told her? The conversation stopped the moment she stepped into the room and they all looked at her. A quiet word from Mr Reed and they began to leave, nodding and squeezing her arm as they went.

Once they'd gone, her boss walked slowly towards her, his

arms reaching out. 'You shouldn't have come in, Jessie.' He laid a hand on her shoulders, put a finger under her chin and smiled fondly at her. 'We'll see you get home. Would you like to go back in a cab with your friend Sally? Or shall I arrange for Mr Brady's chauffeur to take you home in the company car?'

'That'd be something, wouldn't it?' she said. 'Me in a Bentley.'

'OK. I'll see to it, and Sally can go with you.'

'I was only joking, Mr Reed. Why would they chauffeur *me* around. Anyway, George Brown from the loading bay said he'd get someone to take me in one of the vans.'

'If that's what you'd prefer, Jessie.'

'It doesn't really matter. I wasn't expecting to go home. Today's our busy day. All the dockets and wages—'

'Van or Bentley,' he spoke in a fatherly fashion, 'or a cab. You choose.'

The thought of her and Sally in a chauffeur-driven car should have made Jessie smile, but it didn't. 'The Bentley,' she said, shrugging.

'The Bentley it is. But first things first. Sit yourself down and I'll ring through to the kitchen for a breakfast tray. Would you like tea or coffee?'

'Coffee. Nothing to eat.'

The crashing of the door as Sally barged in startled them both. She had a newspaper in one hand and she was crying. 'Jess! They said you'd come in! I'm sorry, Jessie. I'm so sorry! It's terrible. It's the worst thing I've ever known!'

Jessie took the newspaper from her hand. It had been folded back to a page showing a news flash: DOCKER TRAPPED INSIDE RAGING INFERNO AS CRANE PLUNGES INTO THE THAMES.

'Silly thing. That wasn't my dad. That's not what happened to him. This is someone else. They overloaded his crane and—'

'But it mentions him by name, Jessie. That's *terrible* if they've made a mistake. Is your dad alive then?'

'No. He was killed yesterday. Dolly told me ...' She suddenly felt very sick. White stars were shooting through her head. 'I don't know. Do you think so? I don't know. We went to bed.' The feeling of nausea was overwhelming. 'Mr Reed?' The flashing white stars surged forward until everything was flashing white and then it went black.

Jessie didn't really appreciate the ride in the chauffeur-driven Bentley; she was fully conscious but it was as if she was drifting through time. She'd asked Sally not to go with her. She just wanted to be by herself until she was with her family. All she wanted was her mother, her sister, and her brothers.

The boys and Dolly were at home but Jessie was horrified to see that the sitting room was crammed with people, mostly men, her father's work mates from the docks, some of whom had witnessed the horror. Her uncles were also there as well as Grandmother Blake. Jessie thought of the scene in the sitting room the night before it happened, when they didn't show the least bit of interest in what her dad was saying. Jessie had never much liked them; now she felt that they were partly responsible. If they had listened, had reacted, had told him not to be a fool, maybe he would have paid attention and would be in his favourite chair now instead of in the morgue.

The more his smiling face as he explained about the heavy load and the crane came to mind, the more she believed that he had been waiting for his brothers to tell him not to drive it. But neither of them had, and they probably had no idea that he had been hoping for an excuse not to risk his life.

Jessie looked from them to officials from the National Workers Movement, who were having a quiet word with her mother. The conversation was low and their expressions serious. Jessie overheard one of them insist that it was management's fault and those responsible would be brought to justice and made to answer. Compensation was mentioned but Rose broke into tears at that point and the conversation stopped.

Dolly was earnestly telling a young reporter how she had

always wanted to be a writer herself, how she loved to read poems and early history. Sadly for her, he wasn't interested. All he wanted was a quote from a distressed member of the family.

'I bet no one around this way knows that Chaucer used to live in Aldgate,' Dolly told him, 'and that his dad owned twenty-four shops in Whitechapel. I don't expect you knew that either.'

'No, I didn't. How fascinating, Miss Warner. Now, about your father's accident—'

'Whitchapel was no more than a village then of course, same as Stepney and Bethnal Green—'

'It must have been a terrible shock,' he said, his pencil poised over his notebook. 'What were your first thoughts when you heard about it?'

'A shock? Oh no, it's an everyday occurrence round these parts. Men go crashing into the Thames every day. Of course it was a shock! I've told two reporters that already! We don't really want to keep on being reminded! It only happened *yesterday*.'

'Well, it's my job to let the public know ... and it will help your mother—'

'No it won't. It can't bring Dad back and that's the only help she wants.' Dolly went quiet and glanced around her. 'I think everyone should go now.'

'Of course, I understand how you must feel, but if I could just ask you one question. What do you think of the London Dock Management now?'

Dolly looked sideways at him and sighed heavily. 'I don't think about 'em, never have done.'

'Ah.' There was a glimmer of hope from the reporter, 'So you've always been against your father working in the docks, worried for his safety, cranes being somewhat antiquated.'

'No. I love the docks. Dad used to take us there sometimes to see the ships. The London docks are not that old, you know.' Now she was side-tracking to annoy him. 'St Katherine's was

only built a hundred and fifty years ago. It was the Romans who started it really, they built Londinium on the banks of the River Thames and—'

'I, er, I see another young lady's arrived. Would she be your sister, Jessie?'

'Yeah, that's our Jess. She looks too upset to talk to you though.' Leaving the journalist to himself and without a quote, Dolly went over to Jessie and squeezed her arm. 'You all right?'

'Not really. I'm going up to our room. Can you cope with this lot?'

'I'm about to throw 'em all out.'

'No, you mustn't do that, Doll, as much as I'd love you to. You'll embarrass Mum.'

'She doesn't want them here, Jess. Look at her face, she's drained. Don't worry,' she whispered, 'I'll be as polite as I can.'

In the quiet of her room, Jessie lay on her bed and brought her dad's face to mind. His kind face and brown wavy hair, the way he was relaxed and smiling when he joked that if the worst should happen they were to send red roses and not go in black. The worst had happened, and Jessie could not take it in. How could he be dead? She thought about red roses. Imagined her bedroom full of them, deep red and scented. 'Don't go away, Dad,' she whispered. 'Stay with us.' She turned on her side, curled up her knees, hugged her pillow and cried herself to sleep.

Both Jessie and Dolly had been given a week off work with pay and the boys a week off school to allow them to mourn their father. When Robert's body was brought back to the house in the coffin, the atmosphere seemed to change and each of them found they were pleased to have him back and looking so peaceful, as if he was asleep. Fortunately, Robert hadn't been badly burned. Some of the newspapers had exaggerated

the story or jumped the gun before proper press releases had been given out. The engine of the crane had been overstrained and a fire had been the result, but the neck of the crane had given way under the heavy load before the flames really took hold, plunging into the River Thames, where Robert died from drowning, not from burns or fumes.

On the eve of the funeral, relatives and friends arrived to see him for the last time before the coffin was closed for ever. Jessie was fetching and carrying sandwiches from the kitchen when she overheard one of her father's friends having a quiet word with Rose. Intrigued by the secretive tone of his voice, she listened outside the door.

'No, Rose, it's nothing to do with the compensation, I promise. I've something else to tell you.' The family friend sounded as if he was about to make a confession. 'It's about Robert.'

'Not now, Bert. Later,' said Rose, tired. 'Wait until everything's settled down a bit. I don't want to talk about the wrongdoing of the dock board for the time being. Maybe later when—'

'It's not about that, Rose. It's more private ... personal. Robert asked me to pass on a message to you if anything went wrong. I don't really think he believed anything would go wrong but, just in case it did, he wanted me to ... well, to say ...'

'Come on then, Bert, out with it. I must give Jessie a hand upstairs. What was the message?'

'He said I was to ask you to, well, to ... to bring the girls together and not to leave it for too long. I know what he meant, Rose, because he told me all about it, way back. It's not for me to offer an opinion, I'm just passing on his wishes.'

'I see. Thanks for telling me, Bert, and for keeping it to yourself. I'll give it some serious thought and I'd appreciate it if you could push it from your mind.'

'I will, Rose, don't you worry. As far as I'm concerned,

what he told me will go with him to his grave and with me to mine.'

They continued to speak in a whisper. Jessie slowly backed away, running the words through her mind. Think seriously about bringing the girls together? What had he meant by it?

Upstairs, Jessie was glad to see that Max had turned up. She hadn't given him much thought but he was a comforting sight and when he put his arm round her she realised just how much she needed him, needed that deep feeling of trust, warmth and loyalty.

That night, once everyone had gone and Rose was resting on her bed, Jessie and Max sat on the front step and talked in a way they had not done before, mostly about their childhood and their parents. When he pushed his hand through her hair and said he loved her, she started to cry.

'That's it, Jess,' he said. 'Let all the grief out, cry away the sadness, because one day you will smile and be happy again. I promise you. My Jessie will laugh again.' He kissed the tip of her nose and brushed strands of loose hair from her face. 'I'll always be here for you. Always.'

'I know you will, Max.'

Taking her hand he suggested they go for a slow walk, there was something he wanted to show her, something that might cheer her up a little.

Strolling along the Broadway, Jessie confided to Max what she'd overheard that day, the message from her dad delivered by one of his best friends. Max shrugged it off, saying that people got very emotional and sometimes carried away when there was a death in the family. He suggested she forget it. Jessie went on to tell him about her visit to her real grandmother. The accident had happened the very next morning so she hadn't had the chance or the inclination to talk to anyone about it. Other than Stephen and Mr Reed, no one else knew.

Max was pleased for her but in his usual, sensible way, he advised that she be very careful about mentioning it to Rose.

He told her to let it lie for a couple of weeks and although Jessie said she agreed with him she had already decided that she would bring them together as soon as she could, before her grandmother died and it was too late. She had learned a very important lesson from her dad's death, his lesson, which he'd often repeated: put off nothing till the morrow if it can be done the day.

'Well, here we are,' said Max, stopping outside a small pawnbroker and jewellery shop. 'This is it what I wanted you to see.' He pointed to the jewellery display in the window. 'Can you see that tray in the corner, between the grid ...'

'The ring tray? The diamond ring tray?'

'Engagement ring tray, Jessie. Look at the ring third from the left, top row. The solitaire.'

'Yeah, I'm looking.'

'Well, that's the one I've been paying off for. I was keeping it a surprise. Your dad knew about it, he was the only one I told.' Max placed his hand on Jessie's face and looked into her blue eyes. 'Will you be my fiancee, Jessie Warner?'

'Max, would you have been paying off on that beautiful ring if you thought for one minute that I would say no?'

'You do like it then.'

'Like it?' She looked from him to the ring, the sparkling diamond ring. 'It's beautiful. Of all the others, that's the one I would have chosen. I love it.'

'It's not the biggest though.'

'It is to me.' She wrapped her arms round him. 'I'm really, really pleased you told Dad. I feel as if he's here, giving his blessing. He thought a lot of you.'

Choked, Max lowered his eyes. 'I know.'

'It will be all right, won't it? Tomorrow. The funeral. Me and Mum and Dolly ... and the boys. We'll get through tomorrow, won't we?'

'You'll get through it, Jessie. People always do. One way

or another.' Max gave her another long, comforting hug and they walked slowly home together.

And indeed they did get through it. The procession, the church, the heartrending service. When the guests had returned to the cars to make the short journey from the church back to the house, Rose, Jessie, and Dolly and the boys were left by Robert's grave to say their private goodbyes. Holding a beautiful wreath of red roses, they carefully lowered it onto the coffin and prayed together. Opening her eyes after saying a few silent words to her dad, Jessie glanced up to see that Rose's attention was elsewhere and that her face showed uncertainty. She was peering at a woman standing beneath an overgrown tree who was looking over at them.

Jessie looked from the strange woman to Rose and whispered, 'Who is she, Mum?'

'No one to concern ourselves over. You and Dolly take your brothers and see if your uncles have sorted out who's to go back to the house in which cars, there's good girls. I just want a few minutes by myself.'

Pressing a single rose in her hand, Jessie brought it to her lips and then dropped it into the grave. 'Goodbye, Dad,' she murmured and walked away, arm in arm with Dolly, towards the cemetery gates.

Rose moved towards the woman. She felt she should know her, there was something familiar about her. Something *very* familiar. She quickened her pace, hardly able to believe her eyes. She hadn't seen Gerta in a very, very long time. Why she should turn up at Robert's funeral was beyond her.

'I trust the service went well,' said Gerta when Rose came up to her. 'I was sorry to read about the tragedy. It was quite shocking.'

'Thank you'. Rose managed a tight smile. 'If I had known you were here I would have asked you to join us. How are you?'

'Struggling. But I'm used to it. Your brother, Jack, has

much to answer for. He left me a broken woman.' Gerta showed no sign of compassion. 'Why do you not ask about Hannah? About her welfare? Or have you completely wiped that daughter from your mind?'

'Of course I haven't. I think about you both. Don't forget it was *you* who insisted that Robert and I should have nothing to do with her, Gerta. Don't tell me you've changed your mind after all this time.' Rose felt her stomach turn. Was Gerta here to cause trouble?

'I am here for one reason and one reason only. To remind you that your late husband had five children, not four. I would like you to set the record straight, with your solicitor.' There was a chilling smile on Gerta's face.

How she has changed, thought Rose. 'Why would I want to do that, Gerta?'

'I doubt you would want to do it, but needs be.'

'Needs be? Get to the point, please. I've guests to attend to.'

'All I want is fair play. According to the newspapers you're likely to get a handsome sum in compensation for the way Robert died. I want my share. I'll settle for fifty per cent of your claim since I took on fifty per cent of your responsibilities those years back.' Gerta glanced over Rose's shoulder and saw that Jessie was by the gates, watching them. 'Maybe I should beckon Hannah's twin to come over so we might explain.'

'No. I've heard what you have to say and yes, I will speak to my solicitor if the claim is successful. But I warn you, these things take time, and I want your word that you will keep the secret.'

'I have nothing to gain by giving it away, though the loss to you would be heavy. Twins should never be parted and yours would not forgive you for it. Your daughter is on her way over. She looks very much like Hannah, doesn't she? Except for the way she presents herself to the public. I would have expected you to see that your girls would dress more plainly. It looks

as if I am about to meet her. What would you like me to say? Who shall I pretend to be?' Gerta's cold eyes were livened with something like amusement.

Rose spun round. Jessie was too close for comfort. 'I'll be in touch as soon as I can,' said Rose, wanting to leave.

'Good. Because if you don't, you'll have the newspapers to deal with and you can be sure that the picture they paint of you won't be a pretty one.' The evil smile was back.

'If you talk to a reporter I'll see to it that you get nothing. I don't care about other people and what they think of me, I'm only concerned for my children. Robert and I did what we thought was for the best at the time. Now I see that we were wrong. Keep away from my family, Gerta, I warn you.'

'How can I do that when I have one of them in my loving care?'

Turning on her heels, Rose strode towards Jessie, linked arms with her and walked her out of the church grounds.

'Who is she?' asked Jessie. 'What did she want?'

'Never mind. We shan't be seeing her again. Let's get this funeral over and out of the way. I've had enough of people and false pleasantries. All I want is to be at home with my children by my side, and no one else.'

Later, when the last of the visitors had left the house, Rose, the boys, and Jessie enjoyed a cool glass of lemonade in the kitchen, exhausted from having to talk to so many people. Taking them all by surprise, Dolly appeared, made up to the nines. She'd taken off her smart funeral suit, put on one of her bright frocks and was wearing more make-up than usual. Her eyebrows had been pencilled black, her face powder was heavy and her rouge almost as bright as her lipstick. To top it all, her light auburn hair was brushed out and lacquered stiff. Even the boys were shocked into silence.

'And where do you think you're going, looking like that?' There was a slight tremble to Rose's voice, whether from the trauma of the day or the sight of Dolly, it was difficult to say.

'I'm meeting all my mates at the Tavern,' she said. 'It's free drinks! They want to cheer me up, they've arranged a whip-round. A shilling from each of them to pay for my drinks. There's gonna be about a dozen girls from work there, we might even go back to Ivy's house for a bit of a do. Her mum and dad said we could.'

'Well, you can just go and wash that muck off your face and take off that dress.' Rose's voice was unbelievably calm. 'We're in mourning for your father, in case you've forgotten.'

'I know, but we don't have to sit around and be miserable. Eileen at work is Catholic and they always sing and dance after a funeral. They're doing this for me. *Especially* for me!'

'Dolly, I can understand if you need to be with your friends for an hour,' said Rose, 'but you are not to go out looking like that. You know how your father felt about heavy make-up – and Eileen's family do things differently from us.'

'But Dad's not here to see me, is he? So he can't get into a temper over how I look. I can wear what I want now that Dad's not around.' She dabbed a little Evening in Paris scent behind her ears. 'I'll be sixteen soon, don't forget.' Having shocked them into silence yet again, Dolly flounced out of the room, telling them not to wait up. The slamming of the street door sent a shudder through them all.

Gripping the back of a chair, Rose used every bit of willpower not to break down. Her face showed her torment. Torment and fear. There were four children to bring through and she had to do it by herself.

Jessie beckoned her brothers away, into the passage, where she gave them a hug and told them to read their comics, on their beds, until she went up. They both started to cry, and it seemed to Jessie that her world, their world, was falling apart. The loud banging at the door snapped her out of her silence. 'Up you go, boys. I'll just see who that is.'

Jessie opened the front door to find her friend Sally on the step, holding a lovely bouquet of bright flowers, orange, red

and yellow dahlias. 'These are from me, Ron and Tom. Tom suggested it. He thought they might cheer you up a bit.'

Jessie didn't know what to make of it. *Tom* had suggested they send some flowers? 'That's really kind, Sally, but you shouldn't have come out on such a damp night. Do you want to come in for a minute? We can go in my bedroom, Mum's not really up to seeing anyone.'

'I'm not surprised. I wasn't expecting to be asked in, Jess, I only came to deliver the flowers and say how sorry we all are.' She pushed the bouquet into Jessie's arms. 'And Tom sends his best wishes and love.'

Confused by the word love, Jessie waved Sally into the passage. 'My bedroom's the first door on the left, after the second small flight of stairs. Wait in there for me. I'll be up in a minute.'

Taking the flowers downstairs into the kitchen, she saw that the boys hadn't gone up to bed but were huddled close to Rose, Stephen by her side and Alfie on her favourite padded footstool, snuggled up, with his head on her lap.

'I was just saying to the boys that a day out would do us all the world of good. We could go to Chessington Zoo. What do you think, Jessie?' Rose's voice was thin and strained. 'It would brighten us all up.'

Moved by the small family scene, Jessie nodded and said she thought it was a lovely idea. Then she excused herself and went to her room, wondering if her mother would be able to pull herself through the next few weeks. She had always relied on their dad for companionship in the same way that he had relied on her. Now Rose was alone.

'I'm really pleased you came round, Sally,' said Jessie. 'How's everyone at work?'

'As if you care,' Sally said, eyeing her friend. 'You don't have to pretend with me, Jess. We're mates.' She pulled an envelope from her pocket. 'Tom asked me to give you this card and say how sorry he was about everything.'

Jessie took the envelope and put it in her drawer. 'I thought he might have been with the other dockers, outside the gates. The hearse stopped at the docks especially so they could say their goodbyes. I looked out for him, but he wasn't there.'

'Well, he wouldn't be, would he? He's still in the London.'

Jessie's eyes widened. 'The London Hospital?'

'Yep. Broken bones and a few stitches here and there. Luckily that handsome face of 'is wasn't marked – except for a busted lip and black eye. He's been in there for a week, Jessie. I thought you knew.'

'The attack at the People's Palace. I haven't given it a thought. I was there ...'

'I know, he told me. He knows you got away safely though, Hannah told him.' Sally went quiet and thoughtful. 'I don't know what to make of this Hannah, they seem really close. I can't help thinking that they're sweethearts. Tom insists she's more like a sister but I'm not sure. What did you make of it?'

'I liked her,' Jessie said, her mind still on Tom. 'I should go and visit him ...'

'Ron reckons that Tom's gonna join the Blackshirts over that night. Get his own back.'

Jessie ignored that. 'How long's he in for?'

'Another week or so. Would have been out tomorrow but the bone specialist was worried about his fractured arm. I won't go into the gory details but they might 'ave to break and reset it again in a couple of days' time. You must have read about it in the 'local.'

'No ... I've not been in the mood to read about people trying to kill each other. I'll go and see him.'

'What's your boyfriend gonna think about that, Jess? You visiting a handsome feller in bed? Won't Max be jealous?'

'No. Max isn't like that. Besides, we're getting engaged. He's paying off for a ring.'

'Oh, right. So you're not interested in Tom then?'

'Not in the way you think. I suppose he sees me the same as he does Hannah – a friend.'

'If you say so, Jess. If you say so.' There was a wry smile on Sally's face.

Jessie's first day back at work after the tragedy wasn't as difficult as she had imagined. Once those who knew her had inquired about her and her family's welfare, life in the offices and the factory continued as normal – busy.

Making a snap decision to go and see Tom after work, Jessie wished away the butterflies which were playing havoc with her stomach. She felt nervous about seeing him again, as if she was doing something wrong. Sally's question as to whether Max would be jealous had touched a chord and worried her, so to avoid unnecessary upset she decided she wouldn't tell Max about the visit. What the head doesn't know the heart can't grieve over.

At the hospital, by Tom's bedside, in the long, clinical, hospital ward, Jessie searched for the right words and felt a complete fool. Seeing him lying there, bruised but as handsome as ever, she also felt shy. 'I'm sorry I haven't brought anything. The shops were closed by the time I left work and—'

'That's all right, Jessie,' he said, pulling himself up into a sitting position and wincing in pain. 'Mother sees that my cupboards are full – look at that fruit bowl. She fusses around as if I'm a six-year-old.'

'Are you an only child then?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Hardly. So, Jessie Warner, you've pardoned me then, at last.'

'Pardoned you? I'm still waiting for an apology! Standing me up was one thing, but sending some poor sod to do your dirty work . . . And as for your messages, sprained ankle? Hurt your back? You sure it wasn't a sprained wrist?' Jessie sat down by the bed.

'Good,' said Tom, straightening his pillow, 'that's that out of the way. You gonna ask how I am then?'

'I can see how you are. They'll be turning you out in a couple of days.'

'I wish. It's the nurses. They're doing their best to keep me here for as long as they can. They love me.'

'I bet they do.'

'Anyway, never mind me, how's your mum?'

'Not too bad. Oh, and thanks for the flowers – and the card. I appreciated that. Does it hurt?'

'Course it hurts ...' he placed a hand on hers, 'knowing you'll walk out of here soon and I won't see you again.'

She withdrew her hand. 'Why did you do that to me, Tom? Being stood up in front of Sally was really embarrassing.'

'I had my reasons. Anyway, I sent a good-looking bloke, someone who'd treat you like a lady. He was all right, wasn't he? Treated you with respect?'

'Tch. Respect. It was meant to be a date not an appointment. Anyhow, that's all behind us now. I must be mad coming in to see you but there you are. I'll probably kick myself for it.'

'No you won't. And I'm glad you came, I've not stopped thinking about that night when I could have been with you at the Odeon, sitting in the back seat. I'm sorry for what happened but I had no choice – I *thought* I had no choice.' Glancing past Jessie, his expression turned serious. Hannah was approaching.

Jessie followed his gaze. 'Ah ... I'd best be going, mustn't play gooseberry twice. Besides, I'm meeting my chap.'

'Oh, right, yeah, mustn't keep *him* waiting. Mind how you go, Jessie.'

'You as well, Tom.' She smiled at him.

'Tom, you look so much better,' exclaimed Hannah. 'I can't believe it. Your cheeks are *glowing* with health. Doesn't he look fine, Jessie?'

'He's all right. You can have him all to yourself now.' Jessie stood up as if to leave.

'I don't want him all to myself, thanks very much,' she smiled, 'so you needn't go on my account.' She looked at Jessie and showed sympathy. 'I was sorry to hear about your father. Very sorry. I wanted to come and see you but I don't know where you live.'

'Thanks.' Jessie was grateful for the simple, natural and sincere sympathy Hannah offered. 'It was a shock and none of us are over it yet. It's gonna take a very long time to get back to normal. It did cross my mind to call on you, as it happens, but I don't think I went outside our house all of last week, except to run down to the shop.'

'Well, you know where I live and you may knock on the door whenever you want. If my mother should answer, take no notice of her manner, she's not the friendliest of people.' Hannah looked from Jessie to Tom. 'He hasn't stopped mooning over you, you know.' She grinned and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'I said you would see her again.'

'Jessie's trying to leave, Hannah.' Tom was uneasy at the way the girls were getting on, they were a little too close for comfort. 'She's late for her date. I don't want her boyfriend coming in and breaking my other arm.'

'Pay him no attention, Jessie. You take the chair and I'll sit on the edge of his bed. Matron has just gone off duty and—'

'Hannah, she's got to go.' Tom sank his head into his pillow. 'I'm in a hospital bed, not a deck chair on the beach, enjoying the sun and air. I'm supposed to be resting. One of you go, for Christ's sake. Two of you at once is one too many.'

'You make us sound like a matching pair.' Jessie turned to Hannah. 'He doesn't exactly give out gentle hints, does he? I hope the nurses do what you want them to, Tom. 'Bye, Hannah.' Head down, she walked slowly away without turning back.

'Jessie!' Tom called after her. 'Thanks for coming! I'll return the visit once I'm out of here.' His shout was met with shushing from other visitors and hospital staff.

Jessie had to admit that she'd wanted to see him again, if only to find out why he had stood her up, though she was still none the wiser. This had been the third time she'd seen him and each time she had been left with a desire to see him again. Stupid cow, she thought. Stupid blind fool! Lost in her thoughts, she collided with a visitor.

'I'm so sorry,' she apologised. She began to perspire, inwardly blaming the heating system, it was very hot in the hospital. 'It was my fault and I'm really sorry.' She helped the woman pick up the bag of oranges which had scattered. 'I should have been looking—'

'That's all right, love, no harm done. But you should slow down a bit . . . Jessie Warner. You'll get to wherever you're going a lot quicker if you do. What's my Tom done to upset you then?'

Jessie stared at her. She looked vaguely familiar but she couldn't place her.

'Don't recognise me, do you?' smiled Emmie. 'We met outside Stepney Green station. I'm Tom's mother.' She squeezed Jessie's arm. 'My condolences over the terrible tragedy. I was very, very sorry to read about it.'

'Thank you,' said Jessie, backing away. 'I came in to see Tom because I was there when it happened, at the People's Palace. I met up with him and Hannah and . . . well . . . I just wanted to come and see how he was.' Blushing, Jessie hurried away, anxious to be outside in the cool, fresh air and away from all of them.

'Poor kid,' said Emmie, pulling up a chair next to Tom's bed, 'losing her dad at such a fragile age. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

'It was good of her to come and see me,' said Tom, wishing Jessie hadn't left. 'I never expected that. I'll drop her a line

while I'm in here,' he said, rubbing his chin. 'It'll kill a bit of time.'

Emmie checked the fruit in his bowl. 'I wonder how she knew you was in hospital.'

'Sally told her.'

'Oh, right. I thought perhaps you'd written her a letter or something.'

Ignoring that, he turned to Hannah. 'She never believes a word I say, I may as well talk to the brick wall.'

'She's a friendly girl, isn't she?' said Hannah to Emmie. 'I met her that evening when Tom was beaten up. We got on really well. She came back with me for a cup of tea. I feel as if I've known her all my life.'

There was a moment's silence as Emmie and Tom exchanged worried glances.

'Move your chair, Hannah,' said Emmie, inching hers closer to his bed. 'My bloody feet are killing me. I'm going to ease off my shoes.'

Tom rolled his eyes. 'Don't mind me. Make yourself at home. I can handle pain without the need for a bit of sympathy.'

'Go on,' said Emmie, enjoying herself. 'I would never 'ave guessed it.' She pushed her face close to his and examined his eye. 'That's coming along nicely. Have you opened your bowels today?'

'Bloody hell,' he moaned. 'If you ever embarrass me while Jessie's here . . .'

'Oh, she's coming again then?'

'I never said that, what I meant was, don't embarrass me in front of . . . strangers.'

'Oh dear. So she's a stranger now?'

'I don't think so, Emmie,' said Hannah, enjoying the banter between mother and son. 'You should have seen the way he brightened up when Jessie was here. You know what I think? That she was a little jealous of my coming during her cosy

visit. She's as mad about him as he is about her. This time I think Tom was right about fate playing a hand.'

Emmie ignored that. She could act her way through this hospital visit but deep down she was very worried. The twins had met up sooner than she imagined. She wanted Hannah to go so she could find out from Tom what exactly was going on.

'Look at him,' chuckled Hannah. 'Doesn't he look like the dog who just let the bone go?'

'Listen, Hannah. I am in a bit of pain as it happens, my arm's throbbing and I'm tired—'

'She'll be back, Tom, stop sulking. Anyhow, I only came in to give you my good news. I'm looking for a flat,' she said, looking very pleased with herself.

'Good for you,' said Emmie. 'It's just about the right time for you make a move, but don't go rushing into anything. Let me have a look before you take one on, you don't want to make a mistake and have to go running back home to your mother, not once you've flown the nest.'

'Of course I'll want you and Tom to see it first. I'm going to take my time. I want two spacious rooms with plenty of light and it must be sunny and with a view. A beautiful view of a garden or a lake.'

'Around this way? You'll be lucky,' laughed Tom.

'Maybe not around this way, Tom. Maybe in Essex, Walthamstow. The chief librarian was telling me that his daughter found a small self-contained flat there which is very reasonable and has its own tiny garden. He thinks there's another one up for rent which is just a fifteen-minute walk from the railway station.'

Emmie couldn't remember seeing Hannah looking so radiant, she really was beginning to bloom at last. 'I can't say I know too much about the place, love, but one of our cleaners at work has a daughter who's marrying someone from

Walthamstow, as it happens. I'll get a bit more information from her if you like.'

'You see. Twice in one week – fate?'

'Can't see you living in the country, Hannah,' said Tom.

'Walthamstow's hardly the country, son,' Emmie answered for her, 'but it's out of the East End. Just don't bite off more than you can chew, Hannah, and take things one step at a time.'

'Don't worry, I will.' She leaned forward and kissed Tom on the cheek. 'Get Sally to write down Jessie's address for me. I would like to call on her. I think she wants to be friends as much as I do.'

Once she'd gone, Tom and Emmie looked at each other and cleared their throats. 'See what I mean, Mother? The pair of them met by accident and got on like a house on fire. Who's gonna be the one to break the news?'

'Well, I can't break a promise. I don't really see what I can do about it. I haven't got an idea in my head over this one.'

'Hannah hasn't stopped talking about her since they met,' he said.

'That's no surprise. You can't even count Hannah's friends on two fingers. She's bound to latch on to someone like Jessie, even if they wasn't twins.'

'My thoughts entirely, Mother,' he said, throwing her an accusing look.

On her way home, Emmie found herself thinking about the unhappy time, way back, when Jessie and Hannah were parted. Full of self-reproach, she wished things had been different. On reflection, she felt she might have done more at the time to help Rose and Robert to keep both babies. But she was younger then, she hadn't learned to deal with life the way she did later. She had gained power to the elbow with time and would speak out when right was right and wrong was wrong. No more than a couple of years back, she could have taken the reins and laid down the law, telling Rose what she must

do and seeing that she did it. Not any more, though. She was feeling her age.

The thirty-minute walk home from the hospital tired her. The house was very quiet when she let herself in. She hung up her coat and hat and went into the kitchen. On the old pine table the flour was ready, the peeled and sliced apples marinating in brown sugar and cloves. Catching sight of her reflection in the small mirror above the butler sink she peered more closely at her face. She hadn't always looked like everyone's mother. She'd once had an hourglass figure and took pride in her looks, her good looks. She'd had the best head of hair in her time, thick, long, curly red hair. Her hazel eyes had been bright and clear. Now they were dull, with deep lines spreading outwards. In days gone by, she would have taken the time to put on make-up, brush and style her hair; she was fifty-six years old and she could have been taken for seventy. She pulled the lapel of her blouse forward and smelt her body. Instead of Lily of the Valley talcum powder, there was a tinge of perspiration mixed with the scent of Lifebuoy soap.

'What *have* you done, Em? Where's that lovely slim woman you once were?' She lowered herself into her chair, knowing exactly what she'd done; she'd given up what she once was in order to be the best mother and the wife of all wives. She'd been doing that for so long that she hadn't noticed the change or when it had come about. 'Emmie,' she murmured, 'Emmie, where are you?' She swept the back of her hand across her face and brushed away her tears.

The light of the moon shining through the kitchen window warmed her. It was as if a familiar old friend had come out to comfort her, a familiar and reliable friend who returned as regularly as clockwork, season after season.

Without thinking she reached out and took an apple from the fruit bowl, a lovely crisp, green and red apple with a nice smell. She bit into it and the juice ran down the corner of her mouth. When she was a nipper the only time she ate an

apple was when she'd pinched one off the back of a market stall, way back when she wore no socks in the summer and second-hand boots in the winter. Through all of those hard times she couldn't remember being miserable. She'd come from a big happy family who made the most of everything. Emmie wondered right then if she would ever get back that 'couldn't care less' feeling.

The house seemed so quiet. Johnnie and Stanley were out and her husband, Charlie, had gone to bed. But Emmie enjoyed the time by herself. In the silence she could hear the call of an owl in the distance and thinking of nothing in particular she began to hum the tune of a song she used to sing along to at the local music hall, when she was no more than fifteen or sixteen. Before she realised it, she was quietly singing:

> All the girls in our town ... they lead a happy life,
> Except for just the serious one, who wants to be a wife.
> A wife she shall be ...
> According to who she goes with;
> Along with a certain naval boy,
> Who gave her a little bundle of joy;
> A wife she shall be ...

As memories of those heady days came flooding back, she thought about her satin pouch containing her lipstick and powder, tucked away in one of her cupboards. Maybe she would bring it out of the dark, maybe she would put on her favourite rose-red hat and navy coat, maybe she would go down the local and join her sons for a drink. She was beginning to feel a little more like she had in the old days, when she would sit with the women in their corner of the local and start them off in song.

One hour later, Emmie was on the sofa with her feet up. She had remembered that she'd promised to take Tom a piece

of that apple pie in the morning, on her way to work, and Johnnie and Stanley would be looking forward to a piece as well, after their bread and cheese supper. A couple of beers always gave them an appetite. She drank in the lovely smell of baking pies coming from the kitchen, sank her head into a feather cushion and closed her eyes for ten minutes. Her friend Rose would be all right. She'd get used to being a widow . . . in time. They would all get used to the idea that there would now only be a space where Robert used to be. Robert Warner, a kind and gentle man as well as a good husband and father. Emmie could hear her Charlie snoring from above and for once in her life she welcomed the sound.

Chapter Six

During the months that followed, the Warner family pulled together and did their best to get on with their lives. Dolly's strange reaction to her father's sudden death continued for a couple of weeks – she went out every night, dressed to kill. Fifteen- and sixteen-year-old lads were continually knocking on the door until she herself began to tire of it. Wisely, Rose said nothing to her daughter and waited for it all to fade away.

Christmas came and went with as little fuss as necessary. Rose just wanted to get it over with. On New Year's Eve, she flatly refused to share it with anyone except her children. She didn't want to have to see out that year with people trying to cheer her up and neither did she want to reminisce. When she woke on New Year's Day, she saw that it had snowed heavily in the night and would have been happy if it had gone on snowing until it reached halfway up their front door, blocking out the world.

In February there was more upheaval in the house as at last the electricity was put in. When the workmen had gone, all of them took delight in running around the house playing with the switches, thrilled by the instant and much brighter lights. For Rose's birthday in early March, Jessie and Dolly clubbed together and bought her a small bedside lamp from the Co-op, and as a really special treat, Jessie coerced Dolly into agreeing

to paying off weekly for a small one-bar electric fire for Rose's bedroom.

The case of negligence over Robert's death dragged on, but the family solicitor was hopeful that the claim for compensation would soon result in a substantial sum being paid to Rose and the children.

Slowly Rose tried to pick up the broken pieces of her life and get back into her old routine of running the cobbler shop as well as the household. But her heart wasn't in it and she became quiet and subdued. Jessie found it difficult sometimes not to be sharp with her, but Max was a tower of strength, giving her advice, calming her when she was angry, lighting her up when she was down. He reckoned that by the following month, July, he would have paid for the engagement ring in full and it would be in its proper place, on the third finger of Jessie's left hand.

Alfie still had the occasional secret smoke and continued to slip out through his bedroom window when he was supposed to be turning in, but there had been no more sign of the knife under his bed. Stephen was still withdrawn but both Rose and Jessie agreed that he was gradually getting back to his old self. He still clung to Rose, and Jessie often discovered them enjoying a cuddle in the big armchair in the sitting room. Whether it was right for Stephen or not, Jessie wasn't sure, but to see them getting so much comfort from each other warmed her heart.

There had been a change in tenants and now, living at the top of the house, was a young Scottish couple, newly married. They, like the tenants before them, kept themselves to themselves and were always polite and friendly when they paid their rent. Since the tragedy, Dolly had had several jobs. She hadn't returned to the gentlemen's club where she'd been a waitress, even though they'd given her a week's leave with pay after Robert's accident. From the gentlemen's club she'd gone to a handbag factory in Leman Street and then on to waitressing in coffee houses and tea rooms; back to the handbag factory, on to a shoe factory and then finally to a toy factory in the Roman Road, Bow, where

she had just met with a minor accident. A spring on one of the clockwork toys she had been assembling had skittered out and caught her eye. Walking around the house like an invalid, with the injured eye bandaged, she looked a sorry sight. Only Alfie had been brave enough to poke fun at her, which had been met by a thump on the shoulder. She was now on her bed nursing her eyes and sulking.

In the kitchen, impatient for the iron to heat, Jessie turned the gas flame higher; she was about to press her favourite dress to wear that evening. Leaning on the kitchen wall, she thought how easier things would be once the compensation came through. Her mother would be able to go shopping for modern electrical appliances, and an iron was at the top of the list.

Jessie wrapped a linen pad round the handle and lifted the iron off the gas flame, licked her finger and checked the heat and then pressed away the creases from the green, red and black patterned skirt of her frock. Max was taking her to the steak and chip restaurant at London Bridge.

'Watch your brothers out there for me, would you, Jess?' said Rose from the doorway. 'They're messing around with the hose pipe. I don't mind them playing with it so long as they've got their bathing trunks on but I don't want them annoying the neighbours again. They squirted water over Mr Brody's son, Rodney, yesterday and he wasn't amused. He'd been working so hard out there in the yard, mucking out that filthy chicken run. That lad's a saint – he loves those chickens.'

'I know. Stephen told me.' Jessie tried not to smile. Little did Rose know that she and Rodney chatted over the garden fence from time to time and she knew that he hated the birds and the run; more than anything he hated the smell. He did it for the weekly payment of a shilling and nothing else.

'I'm going to the Broadway to do a bit of shopping,' Rose went on, a little preoccupied. 'Get Dolly to peel the vegetables for me. Bad eye or not, she should be able to manage that.'

'I'd rather she stayed where she is, to tell the truth,' said

Jessie. 'Her face is as long as a kite and she's in a rotten mood. Max is coming round so he can peel the spuds.'

'I shouldn't think so. Men don't like to do kitchen chores.'

'Max is different, the men in his family muck in. I suppose that's got something to do with them being Jewish – I don't know. They're different from us.'

'I'm not saying it's a bad thing, Jess. All I'm saying is that you don't want to give him the wrong impression, that you won't make a good housewife. That's all I was thinking.' She picked up her handbag and left.

The fact that Rose hadn't taken her shopping bag or her basket didn't surprise Jessie. Her mother had been surreptitious of late and she had a feeling it had something to do with the strange woman at the cemetery. Whenever she broached the subject, Rose dismissed it, but this morning she seemed particularly worried and agitated. She hadn't even mentioned popping into the cobbler shop to check on how the Saturday help was coping. Saturday was now Rose's day off as well as Sunday; since Robert's death she had wanted to be at home when her boys were there.

Once Rose had left the house, Jessie tapped on the yard window to draw her brothers' attention and beckoned them in. Knowing Rose would be out nearly all afternoon and Dolly would more than likely sleep through most of the day, she wanted to spend some time with Max in the house without there always being one or the other of them coming or going. Alfie came to the kitchen to see what Jessie wanted. He stood in the doorway, tall and skinny, dripping water.

'How would you and Stephen like to go to the pictures this afternoon? They're showing a Mickey Mouse film at the Foresters. *Steamboat Willie*. Plus a cowboy film.'

'What, you gonna treat us?'

'Yeah, I'll treat you, Alfie. I would treat you more if I thought you was a good boy.'

'I'm not a boy, Jessie. I'll be going to work next year.'

'I know, but that doesn't make you a man either. You know that Dad knew about your smoking, don't you? He promised Mum that you were only experimenting and it would soon stop.'

'I only 'ave one now and then!'

'Yes, but one thing can lead to another and another and—'

'So you want us to go out,' said Alfie, stopping her flow, 'so you and Max can do it in the living room.'

'Do what in the living room?' Jessie couldn't believe that he meant what he was saying.

'A do. You know, up against the wall.'

'Alfie! That's disgusting! Me and Max wouldn't dream of such a thing!'

'Oh,' he said, disappointed. 'Dolly said you did it all the time.'

'Did she now? Well, Dolly doesn't know what she's talking about, and neither do you. If you realised what you'd just said—'

'I know what it means! I'm not a kid any more, Jess.'

'Oh, silly me! I forgot. You're a young man soon to be leaving school. Maybe you'd rather not go to the pictures with your *kid* brother.'

'I don't mind looking after him,' he said, sniffing.

'Nope, you're right. You are too old for all of that.'

'I *said*, I don't mind!'

'Well, if you're *really* sure, Alfie. Oh, and Mum left a bob on the table for fish and chips for the pair of you.'

'Blimey. Two treats in one day.' Alfie grinned.

'You know it wouldn't hurt you to offer to help in the shop on Saturdays. Mum works there all week and she only takes Saturday off so she can catch up here and go shopping. She has to pay someone to cover for her and Saturday's one of the busiest days.'

'Would she pay me?'

'Tch. I expect she'll let you earn some pocket money. Go on. Get out of my sight and tell Stephen to dry himself properly. Oh, and Alfie,' Jessie called as Alfie scampered off.

'What now? I can't do everything, you know.'

'A neighbour had a word with me the other day. I'm not saying who it was, because I promised I wouldn't. You've been seen chalking Fascist slogans on walls and you know that's wrong. Wrong *and* dangerous. If Mum gets to hear, you'll cop it, not to mention what Max'll think of you if he finds out. He'd be really hurt.'

Avoiding her probing look, Alfie turned away. 'I wasn't gonna do it no more anyway,' he muttered. 'I forgot that Max is Jewish.'

'And what about Max's mum and dad? Mr and Mrs Cohen? How would you like them to find out that you're one of the bully boys? They've had a brick through their window, don't forget.'

'I didn't *know* they were Jewish! I only did it for the tanner. I couldn't care less about anything else.'

'Good. Now come here and give me a cuddle. You're not too old for a hug – and neither am I.'

'I'm not cuddling you!' There was a telltale crack in his voice and he was pressing his lips tightly together.

'You're not gonna cry, are you? It's all right, Max doesn't know about the chalking, if that's what you're upset about. Alfie?'

'I miss my dad,' he said, screwing up his face, desperate to hold back tears. 'I want to see him again, Jessie, just one more time, that's all, so I can say things to 'im.'

Her own eyes filled and Jessie pulled him close and stroked his back. 'You *can* see him, whenever you want, Alfie. You can look at his photograph or just keep on remembering the good times together. It will help, Alfie. I do it all the time. I tell you what, in a couple of days' time, you and me are going to have a little talk. I've got something very special to tell you. Something which'll change all of our lives for the better. Especially Mum's.'

'Tell me now, Jess, tell me now,' he said, his head burrowed into her neck. 'Is it to do with Dad?'

'No, sweetheart, it's not. But you'll like it, I know you will.' Jessie led him to a chair, sat him down and held his hands. 'It's a long, complicated story and I'm not going into it all right now, but I will tell you this and you must promise not to go on at me until I've the time to explain it properly. Granny Blake isn't our real grandmother.'

Wiping his face with the back of his hand, he sniffed again. 'I've never liked the old cow anyway.'

'She's all right really. It's just that we're not blood relatives so she couldn't take to Mum nor us the way she might have. Anyway, we may have lost our dad, Alfie, but we're going to gain a grandmother and Mum will have her own mum back again, after nearly a lifetime of being without her. Last year, just before Dad was killed, the very day before, I found our real gran. Mum doesn't know and she might be cross with me for going behind her back, so you mustn't say anything. Promise you won't.'

He nodded and wiped away the last tear with his sleeve. 'What's she like? Where does she live? Why hasn't she come to see us?'

'I knew you'd do this to me. Just accept that better times are to come and leave it at that. Promise me you won't mention it again until I bring it up. Promise.'

'So long as you don't leave it for months and months.'

'Oh, I won't do that. I'll pluck up the courage soon and tell her.'

'I'll keep the secret then. I won't even say anything to Stephen – or Dolly.'

It was the wrong time to tell him that she had already told Stephen. 'Good.' He was out of the chair in a flash and away, happier than Jessie had seen him in a while. That little talk had done her the world of good too. It seemed to her that Ingrid Gunter, a real grandmother, would be a way of helping

to heal the painful wound the family had suffered when they lost her father.

When she had the house to herself, apart from Dolly hiding away upstairs, Jessie washed and brushed her hair, put on some make-up and the freshly ironed frock and waited for Max. She didn't have to wait long. Unfortunately, though, he wasn't in the same frame of mind as she was. He'd arrived once again in one of his heavy moods. She thought she'd win him round with a kiss and a cuddle, but she was wrong. She had got him in the parlour, on the sofa, but she hadn't got him going – hot sunny day or not.

'It's true,' Max said, preoccupied, 'the BUF did weaken but—'

'The what? What are you talking about, Max?'

'The BUF.' He looked surprised, as if he was seeing her for the first time. 'You don't know what BUF stands for?'

'No. I can guess though. Blackshirts – United – Fascists?' She was making it clear that she couldn't really care less what it stood for.

'British Union of Fascists,' he said, shaking his head despairingly.

'I'm sick of trying to work them all out. What, for instance, [illegible]?'

'Communist Party of Great Britain.'

'ILP?'

'Independent Labour Party, now replaced by the Socialist League.'

Jessie racked her brain but couldn't think of any more.

Max reeled them off for her. 'NUWM – National Unemployed Workers Movement. UAB – Unemployment Assistance Board. PLP – Parliamentary Labour Party. TUC – Trade Union—'

'ILU?' she said, interrupting his flow.

'There isn't one.'

'Yes there is.'

'No there isn't.'

'Think about it, Max. I L U?'

He shrugged, splayed his hands. 'Sorry, Jess, but there isn't.'

'I Love You.'

'Oh, and I thought for the minute you were really interested in what I was saying. Anyway, my party is easy for you to remember – I'm a Socialist. Coming back to you, is it?'

'Ah, but are you so sure about that, Max?'

'Of course I'm sure about it. I've always voted Labour. My family vote Labour. My grandparents—'

'Dad was worried that you might have become a Communist.'

'That's crazy, Jessie. Your dad was pulling your leg.'

'No he wasn't. It's what he'd heard down the docks. That your lot were joining with the Communists against Mosley and his Blackshirts. In fact he wanted us to stop walking out together for a while, until things calmed down.'

'Exactly. Which is why the Fascists put that about. The docks have always been a good grapevine, your dad should have known better than to be taken in by propaganda.' His expression as he looked at Jessie changed. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.' He pushed his hands through his hair. 'It's getting to everyone. My sister said something similar, as it happens. She thought that we should ease off seeing each other for a while. Of course I said we—'

'Which sister?' Jessie asked.

'Moira.'

'I thought as much, she doesn't like me. She's never been keen on us going out together. She wants you to marry a nice Jewish girl. Nathan looked down on me and now she does as well. First of all she was just a bit unfriendly, now she's cold. Deliberately cold.'

'No she isn't, Jessie, you're overreacting. Moira and Nathan are not like that. My sister, like Nathan, just doesn't happen to

believe in mixed religion marriages, that's all. If you were just a friend, she'd be different. Besides, what can you expect? She's bound to be concerned given all the anti-Jewish slogans that keep appearing.'

'That isn't my fault, Max.' All this talk about Moira and Nathan not believing in mixed marriages was news to Jessie. She hadn't actually thought much about Max's sister or her husband and she hardly saw the couple; when she did, Moira's snobbery drove her mad. 'What will she say when we get engaged, I wonder.'

'She's already said it. She thinks it's a mistake. She's been giving me lectures ever since I mentioned it.' Max's expression was wry.

'Oh, so you've told her our secret, that's nice. I've not even mentioned it to Mum, but Moira has to be told, mustn't leave Moira out of it.' Jessie knew she was sounding childish but she couldn't help it.

'I was just paving the way. I thought that by letting her in on it first, she might see things differently, but she didn't. She was shocked, in fact.'

'Moira was shocked? Tch. Oh dear.' Jessie was getting more and more upset, and she was infuriated that Max seemed oblivious of how he was making her feel. 'Well, maybe we should call the whole thing off then.'

'Don't be silly. I think the two of you should sit down and talk about it. She's got nothing against you personally, Jessie, she likes you. She likes you a lot, but . . .'

'But what, Max? What are you trying to say?'

'I'm not *trying* to say anything, I couldn't care less one way or the other, but she and my mother think—'

'Oh, *right*, so there's been a family discussion.'

'Let me finish. She and my mother wondered if you might like to think about converting. They would be willing to help with your Bible studies and—'

'Stop it, Max. You know full well that we're Church of

England. If Mum heard you saying such a thing she'd be offended and hurt.' Jessie went quiet and waited to hear his reaction but there wasn't one. Not one word.

'All right,' she said finally, 'I'll sit down with your mum and your sister and we'll talk about it. They can talk Judaism to me and I'll listen, but they've got to do the same and listen to *hear* what I have to say about Christianity.'

'Would you do that?'

'I've just said I would.'

He slipped off his chair and down onto his knees, laying his head in her lap. 'I love you so much, Jessie. I've been worried because I knew there would be a problem and I was frightened.' He eased her down onto the floor, onto the rag mat in front of the fireplace. 'I don't want religion to come between us, Jess.' He looked up at her with those doleful brown eyes. 'It won't, will it?'

'I hope not, Max. To be honest, I've not really thought about it. I've not considered what *my* family and friends might think about my marrying a Jew – it's not exactly an everyday occurrence, is it?' She kissed his puzzled expression away and then kissed him as she'd never kissed before. It was different this time because she was angry and her anger caused her to feel more passionate.

'I take it,' said Max, his voice husky, 'that your mother's not likely to come back and—'

'Catch you with your trousers down?' Jessie laughed quietly. 'Wouldn't that be something?'

Rose tapped lightly on Emmie's front door, hoping that her friend would be alone. If Hannah was there, she would turn round and go back home before her daughter saw her.

Emmie opened the door. 'Gracious me,' she said in surprise, 'you're the last one I thought it would be, Rose. What a turn-up for the books,' she smiled, '*you* slumming in Bethnal Green.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Emmie. Slumming indeed. Am I to stand on your doorstep then?'

Laughing, Emmie waved her in. 'I was only joking. It's lovely to see you at my door, I must say. Come in and take the weight off your feet.'

Rose followed Emmie through into the kitchen. 'You keep the place as nice as ever, Em. What lovely bright walls – very cheerful.'

'Your timing could have been disastrous, Rose,' she said, placing the kettle on the gas stove. 'It can't have been less than fifteen minutes since Hannah was here. Lucky for us, it was one of her flying visits. She's gone to view some lodgings – a one-bedroom flat.'

'It did cross my mind once I was at your front door but—'

'Well, there's no spilt milk to cry over, is there? She's gone. To be honest I don't really think she's that serious about moving away, it's enough for her to have the vision of one day escaping from Gerta. She's viewing places out of her reach and then reports back how lovely or how unsuitable they are. She's having a smashing time of it. God love her.' Emmie slipped one of her headache pills into her mouth and washed it down with a glass of water. 'You're lucky to have caught me in, Rose. I'm usually at Wickham's of a Saturday and if it hadn't been for my migraine attack earlier on, I wouldn't be here now.'

'I should have realised that as well,' murmured Rose.

Leaving the kettle to come to the boil, Emmie and Rose went into the front room where a small coal fire burned in the polished brass grate. 'You look as if you could do with a break yourself, Rose, you've lost a bit of weight. A holiday by the sea would do you the world of good.'

'I've too many things on my mind to think about that yet, Emmie, which is one of the reasons I'm here. It's to do with Gerta. She turned up at the funeral.' The sound of the whistling kettle filled the house.

Ignoring the high-pitched noise, Emmie's eyes narrowed as she stared disbelievingly at her friend. 'Gerta? At the funeral? No. You must 'ave been mistaken, Rose, surely.'

Rose waved a hand towards the kitchen. 'See to the kettle, Emmie.'

'Gracious me, I hope she didn't go to your house as well.'

'No. She was at the cemetery, hiding in the shadows, under a tree, waiting to get my attention. Emmie, please. That whistling is going right through my head.'

Emmie went into the kitchen, set the tray and returned to the sitting room, forgetting to put any biscuits out. 'The tea needs to brew for a couple of minutes,' she said, sitting opposite her friend. 'I can't for the life of me think why she would have turned up, Rose. Surely you're not going to tell me it was from compassion.'

'No. Greed. She wants a share of any compensation that's paid to me and the children, and she wants power of attorney over Hannah's finances. She has no understanding of the way these things work. I confided in my solicitor that there was another child to be considered and that's slowed things down even more. I don't think she believes me. It's why I came to see you, Emmie. I need someone to talk to. I'm at my wits' end in case Gerta shows up at my door.

'Well, I never did,' said Emmie, shocked.

'I haven't seen her for nigh on sixteen years and, my goodness me, how she's changed.' Rose shook her head. 'She seemed such a decent woman all those years back. Quiet and reserved. She accused me of neglect, implying that once my brother had deserted her and gone back to New Zealand, we should have sent money to support Hannah. I know full well that Jack was sending her an allowance and still is. We may not write to each other much but we do keep in touch.'

'Well, it doesn't surprise me. The woman's a cold, conniving bitch. So what will you do about this? I know what I'd like to do.'

'I agreed to sort something out for the sake of Hannah but I feel as if I'm being blackmailed and I don't like it. It's a horrible feeling, and I can't shift it from the pit of my stomach.'

'You must be careful, Rose. You'll be making a rod for your back. That woman will always have something over you. I think you know what my advice would be.'

'I *can't* tell Jessie. How can I after all this time? I had to go outside, into the back yard, when Gerta chose which of my twin girls she would take. It nearly killed me. I don't want all of that dragged up again.' Rose shuddered. 'Goodness knows what it would do to the girls, never mind my other children.'

'It is blackmail,' said Emmie, pouring out the tea, 'and that's a criminal offence. I hope you told her so.'

'I don't know what I said in the end, to be honest. All I wanted was to get away from her. I do believe there is a streak of evil in the woman. She's within her rights to ask for compensation for Hannah, she is Robert's child and I know it's what he would want, but how do I go about it without Hannah knowing where the money's come from?'

'We can get round that, Rose. Gerta won't go to the authorities – she wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Your brother's been sending an allowance for her and officially Hannah was adopted, so I can't see—'

'That's just it,' Rose cut in. 'She wasn't legally adopted. We just put her into their care. Don't forget, it was fifteen years ago. There were fewer regulations then. If Gerta's not satisfied, she could really go to town and likely get more than she deserves in any case. All she has to do is say that we dumped a baby on her doorstep and she took pity on it.'

'No, Rose, you're worrying too much. I'm sure if we sit here long enough and look at all the options we'll find a way through this.' Emmie felt sure there must be a way.

'I feel very uncomfortable with her having the upper hand like this. She can do what she likes, whenever she likes. She's

very bitter about my brother leaving her and blames us, blames all of his family, for messing up her life.'

'Poppycock. She messed up Hannah's life, more like. She's got no feelings for that poor girl, Rose. None. I'm sorry if you don't want to hear it, but it's the truth.'

Rose let out a deep sigh. 'I've let Hannah down badly, haven't I?'

'Never mind that now. We have to think of the present and what's for the best.'

Sipping their tea, neither said a word for a while. There was nothing uncomfortable about it, no embarrassment, they were just two friends mulling over a shared problem.

Glancing out of the window, Rose saw that there was some pink and white blossom on the trees in Emmie's back garden. 'Sometimes I can see a light at the end of the tunnel, Emmie. Sometimes,' whispered Rose, distracted.

'Of course you can, now that the winter and those harsh March winds are behind us. We all need the sunshine. You'll pick up and have the strength of two to deal with that woman, I'm sure of it.'

'I hope so. I don't seem to have the heart to go into the shop and deal with the business any more. I've lost interest in cooking and I've still got Robert's clothes to sort out. They're hanging in his wardrobe and sitting on his shelves, as if he was still there.'

'Well, I can't help you with the shop, Rose, but I can see that Robert's clothes go to a very good cause. I've done it before, more than once. My neighbours rely on me for that sort of thing, and you can imagine what it's like down at the old people's home. Always someone popping off. Why don't I sort it all out for you on Monday? You go into the shop as usual while I'm at your house packing things away. It's got to be done and it's best that you're not there. It won't take me more than a few hours.' Emmie poured them some more tea. 'To tell you the truth, Rose, I'm very pleased that you came to me for advice.'

'I wish I'd come sooner,' was her tired reply.

'Never mind. What we've got to do now is get you back on the road again, because if Robert can see you, from wherever he is, that's what he'd want to see – you on your feet again, getting stronger by the day. Then we'll get you out there socialising again as well. I wouldn't mind getting out of the house myself, now and then. Wouldn't it be lovely if we were to join Sister Esther's sewing circle at Bromley-by-Bow. We always said we would one day, didn't we? You remember, way back, when the war was on?'

'Dear Emmie,' said Rose, drying her eyes, 'you do have a way of bringing back the good memories. We did have our dreams, didn't we?'

'We did that, and who knows where it might lead us? That space above your cobbler shop would make lovely needlework rooms. The light coming in through those big windows would be a joy to work by. I wouldn't mind betting those rooms are full of junk which should have been thrown out years ago.'

Quietly laughing, Rose agreed. 'They always said that you had second sight. How you could know what those rooms look like I've no idea.'

'Just imagine it, Rose,' said Emmie, carried away, 'a dozen of us women up there using the finest of fabrics to make up lovely evening gowns and day frocks.'

Rose smiled at the thought of it. Her friend was dreaming but, yes, Rose had to admit to herself that it was a lovely vision and Emmie was right, the rooms should be put to a good use and so should her wayward daughter, Dolly. The one thing she'd been very good at when she was at school was needlework. Yes, Dolly could sew a fine seam and had made quite a few of her own clothes, without a pattern. It was food for thought.

'So,' said Emmie, bringing them both back to reality, 'Gerta. The sooner we get started on her, the better. She's a touch scared of me, if the truth be known. I'll challenge her to go public about Hannah and Jessie and I'll defy her to try and squeeze a penny

more out of you than your other children will have. We'll keep it all nice and fair and then a bit later on, once the finances have been dealt with, you and I will have a talk as to what move we make next – with regard to Hannah and Jessie.'

'Not that again, Emmie, please. The girls mustn't meet up.'

Rose was wishing for the impossible. Where Hannah and Jessie were concerned, thought Emmie, there was a hand much stronger than theirs at work. Emmie had a feeling Rose feared losing Jessie's love if she ever discovered what had happened. She toyed with the idea of telling Rose that the girls had already met up but decided that her friend had enough on her plate for the time being; the wretched woman looked as if she had all the troubles of the world on her shoulders. As for Jessie and Tom, their destiny was anyone's guess.

Jessie had enjoyed a long soak in the bath while the house was quiet. Max had gone to a meeting with the promise that he would be back later to take her out for supper at London Bridge, as arranged. Pouring the last remains of water out of the tin bath and into the outside drain, Jessie looked sadly at Robert's vegetable patch. The new season's potatoes he'd planted in early autumn were ready for pulling and the broad bean plants looked in good shape. Strolling to the back wall, she checked the climbing roses. They were already in bud and would hopefully be flowering before the pink japonica and orange burgeris had finished flowering.

Robert had loved his garden and spent several hours out there, working his tiny bit of land, which Rose still referred to as the back yard. Between the small shrubs Jessie saw that the weeds were taking hold.

Against the side of the brick lavatory was the wooden trough which Robert had made and in which he would normally have planted trailing lobelia and a mix of other flowers. This summer they would not have the pleasure of his display. Looking the

tin bath onto its place on the back wall, Jessie heard someone knocking on the front door and her heart sank. She was enjoying her solitude.

With a towel wrapped round her freshly washed hair, she opened the door a little and peered through the gap, astonished to see her grandmother Ingrid Gunter standing on the doorstep.

'May I come inside?' she said matter of factly. Jessie nodded and opened the door properly. 'You seem very shocked to see me. You think me too old to catch a bus or pay you a visit?'

'Mum's not in – no one's here except me and Dolly and she's asleep.' Swallowing, she was caught with an irritating cough.

'Show me where the kitchen is,' said Ingrid. 'You need a glass of water.'

Leading the way, Jessie went downstairs, still coughing. She sipped some cool water. 'It's a bit of a jolt, seeing you here,' she finally managed to say. After all her plans to visit Ingrid, now here she was.

'Well, you could offer me a chair. Maybe a cup of tea?'

'Of course, I'm sorry.' Jessie pulled a chair out from under the pine table. 'I'll put the kettle on, Mum should be back soon.' She felt herself go rigid. 'She doesn't even know that I went to see you.'

'You kept your promise. That makes me very happy. So, we have trust between us. Very important.' Ingrid looked around the kitchen. 'I like it here, there is a something about it that reminds me of the house I shared with your grandfather before he ran off. We had a back-to-back, two up, two down, it was smaller than this house, but yes, it had a similar feel. I was very sorry to have to give it up.'

'Mum could come in any minute,' said Jessie, nervous of what would happen if she did.

'I hope she does. After your visit, I thought about it, thought about what you said. It's time we met. I read about the tragedy and bided my time. Two shocks close together

might have been too much for your mother to take. How is she?'

'Sad for most of the time but pushing on. We're all pushing on, not much choice really.'

'No. Sometimes one doesn't have a choice. I hear footsteps on the stairs. Someone is creeping about.'

'That'll be my sister, Dolly. She's been in bed all day with a sore eye.' Jessie glanced anxiously towards the door.

'Ah. And now she is in for a surprise. Why don't you go and speak to her in private? She may react against me if—'

'Why?' Dolly appeared in the doorway. 'Who are you?'

'I'm your grandmother,' said Ingrid smoothly. 'I was keeping myself to myself but your sister came in search of me and turned my world upside down. Why don't you join us? Jessie is going to pour us some tea when she gets round to it.'

'Oh. So you're not dead then?'

'Should I be?'

'You might as well have been.' Dolly pulled off the lid of the biscuit tin. 'We've never seen hide nor hair of you. Where 'ave you been all this time? Why haven't you come round before now? Grandmothers do that, you know. They bring presents at Christmas and birthdays.'

'Don't mind her,' said Jessie, giving her sister a black look. 'She's in a bad mood because she can't go out tonight. Well, she could but she won't, not with that bandage wrapped round her head.'

'I couldn't care less about the *bandage*. I can't wash my hair!'

The sound of the street door opening and slamming shut startled Ingrid. The girls were used to it. The boys had arrived.

'This'll test you, *Grandma*,' said Dolly. 'They'll fire hundreds of questions.'

Ingrid wasn't ruffled by Dolly. 'Then don't tell them who I am. Say I'm an old friend of your grandfather's.'

The boys rushed into the kitchen and raced to the biscuit tin. They seemed happy enough.

'Good film, was it?' asked Jessie.

'Champion. Is there any cake left?'

'There is, Stephen, but you can't have any yet, not until you remember your manners. We have a visitor, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Munching a chocolate biscuit, Alfie peered at Ingrid and gave a quick nod. 'Hello.'

'I'm very well, thank you. And you are?'

'Alfie.'

Ingrid held out her hand. Bemused, Alfie shook it. 'I am Mrs Gunter. A very old friend of the family. How do you do.'

'I'm all right. What country d'yer come from?'

'I was born in Germany but spent most of my life here, in England.'

Alfie regarded her for a moment then said, 'Oh. Come on, Stephen. They're playing Tin Can Tommy. Be back in an hour!'

Grabbing a couple of biscuits, Stephen followed his brother out of the kitchen and bounded up the stairs behind him. Then came the loud slamming of the street door as the boys ran outside.

'Well, that just leaves my daughter to be faced,' said Ingrid. 'I think it might be better if you girls were to go up to your rooms once she arrives. I have some explaining to do after all these years and so does she.'

'Don't you think I should say something first?' said Jessie, worried.

'That is entirely up to you but I wouldn't recommend it. You needn't worry. What I have to say will not make her angry, she may even forgive an old woman for not having more willpower when she was younger and stronger than she is now.'

'Well,' said Dolly bluntly, 'you don't have time to argue the toss. That's her coming in now.'

'Ah.' Ingrid breathed in, straightened, and then pushed her shoulders back.

'This doesn't feel right,' said Dolly uneasily. 'I don't think this is a very good idea. It's making my eye throb.' Ingrid found herself smiling at Dolly.

When Rose walked into the kitchen she was met with silence. She glanced at Ingrid and then at Jessie. 'What's going on?' she said, puzzled.

'Hello, Rose.' Ingrid's voice was quiet but there was no sign of worry on her face. 'I hope you don't mind but I asked the girls if they would be so kind as to leave us alone when you arrived.'

Rose stiffened and took a step backwards and then another until she felt the kitchen wall behind her and could lean against it. Beckoning to Dolly, Jessie slipped out of the kitchen. As quiet as lambs they went upstairs, hardly daring to breathe. They heard the kitchen door close.

'This doesn't feel right, Jessie,' said Dolly again.

'I know. We didn't have much choice though, did we? We couldn't throw her out. Should we listen on the stairs? What do you think?'

'Not me. I'm going up to our room. I don't want to take the blame for this. This is all your fault. You should have kept your nose out of it.' Dolly slowly climbed the stairs. 'It's too quiet down there. This is the calm before the storm. I'm going under the bed covers . . .' Her words trailed off as she made her escape.

'Thanks, Dolly. Thanks very much.'

Creeping back down the stairs, careful to avoid the creaky ones, Jessie trod carefully towards the kitchen door and listened. It was quiet. Too quiet. Neither of them was saying anything. She put her ear very close to the door in case they were whispering. Nothing. She decided to go in.

'Have you seen today's paper, Mum? I can't find it anywhere.' This seemed an appropriate excuse.

'It's in the parlour,' said Rose distractedly, 'where it usually is.'

'Speaking of newspapers,' said Ingrid, 'what did it feel like having your name spread across the pages?' She seemed to be suggesting that that was how she knew where her estranged daughter lived.

'We got used to it,' said Jessie. 'One article was much the same as another. The nice thing about it was that they made Dad out as a hero. He would have had a laugh at that. Max says the publicity will help our compensation case.' Jessie looked from Rose to Ingrid. 'So. Am I in the black books then?' Neither of them said a word. 'Oh, come on, this is silly. You're together now so you may as well—'

'Mind your manners, Jessie, please,' snapped Rose.

'Manners? We're family, not strangers.' She turned to Ingrid, trying her best to make light of it. 'All we need is your mother as well. Still, for all we know, she may well be in this room with us, in spirit.'

'If you are talking about the afterworld, she is not there. My mother is still alive. Ninety-six and going strong. She lives in Düsseldorf. I went to visit her a year ago with my brother and his wife and she was in good spirits. We went by boat and train, and two trams – three if you count the tram at this end.'

Still Rose remained silent.

'Would you like another cup of tea ... Grandma?' said Jessie, chancing her luck.

'Thank you, no. Please call me Ingrid. I'm not used to such a grand title.'

'I'll try.'

The silence stretched, until finally Rose broke it.

'It's a pity you never met Robert. Just like Jessie, he wanted to know more about you, and why you had to put me into a home.' Her cold tone covered the hurt and confusion she felt at being confronted without warning by her long-vanished mother. Jessie meant well but she could have

no idea of the conflicting emotions that were bubbling up inside Rose.

'And you? Weren't you curious? Didn't you want to find out why I had to do it? Maybe you were too ashamed of your father to face me.' Ingrid's voice was gentle and soothing.

'Or maybe I was waiting for you to find out more about me?' said Rose.

'I knew all there was to know about you. My brother gave me regular reports, he fancies himself as a detective. From the very day I placed you in the home, he kept check. I had every intention of getting you back once I had found somewhere for us to live, somewhere decent. A place that would not only provide a roof over our heads but give me employment as well. I was searching for a position as resident housemaid in one of the big houses or boarding schools.' It seemed that once Ingrid opened up, there was no stopping her. 'I found just the right place, but by then it was too late. Your father had you under his wing.'

'You could have come to see me!' Rose's hurt was fast changing to resentment.

'It would have confused you. Madam Blake had taken over my role and you seemed to be well cared for. I once saw you leave the house with them, a hand in each of theirs. They took you to the park and I followed to watch you on the swings. Mr Gunter was pushing you and you were laughing. I took that to mean that you were happy. I, on the other hand, was not. I walked away and vowed that I would not interfere. Decades later, a persistent granddaughter turns up for a cup of coffee.'

'I might have guessed she would go in search of you,' said Rose. There was the merest hint of a smile on her face but it faded within seconds. 'I suppose it couldn't have been a happy time for you either.'

'No, it wasn't, but I've not been miserable all of my life. I have some good friends, a nice home, a lovely family, my brother's family. Some of my old friends have passed on – Emmie Smith's mother, for instance. That did upset me very

much. She was an old and loyal friend, before and after Madam Blake came on the scene. Her daughter Emmie takes after her; she, too, is a good family woman and she has done well by both you and me. I see her from time to time and she keeps me up to date.'

There was another frosty silence. Jessie knew she should leave but she wanted desperately to stay and find out more.

'Well now, isn't Emmie the dark horse,' said Rose tightly.

Ingrid pulled herself up from the chair. 'Now that you know where I live, maybe you will come to see me, once in a while. I hope, I very much hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.'

'I don't know where you live.' Rose spoke as if she didn't care one way or the other.

'Ask your inquisitive daughter. Maybe she will bring you with her on her next visit.' With that, Ingrid gave a graceful nod and waited for Jessie to show her out of the house, leaving Rose to herself.

'How long has all this been going on, Jessie?' asked Rose when her daughter returned.

Jessie related the story from the beginning and ended by telling her mother that Ingrid, underneath her resentment, had been sad and lonely and upset by her visit and that she doubted she would ever forgive Mr Gunter, as she called him, for betraying her so badly. Rose listened patiently, looking thoughtful and a little sorry.

'Well, some of this is news to me, Jessie, and I must say I do feel some shame at what your grandfather did to her. I can hardly believe it, but then Grandmother Blake is a very strong-willed woman, not to say very beautiful when she was younger.'

'It was brave of her to come,' said Jessie, rubbing her hair with the towel. She realized it had been ridiculous to think there would a fairytale reunion between her mother and grandmother. There was too much pain involved – but she hoped time would soften it.

'Was it? I don't know. I'm a bit thunderstruck, to tell the truth. I had no idea that she'd been keeping watch from afar – and for so long.'

'She gets a bit muddled, though. When I went to see her she blamed herself for you giving away a daughter. As if you'd do a thing like that. I hope I don't get muddled when I'm her age.'

This off-the-cuff remark struck like lightning. Rose held her breath, wondering what would come next.

'I told her that Dolly lived with us. Then she blamed her brother for getting his facts wrong. She went all quiet after that.'

Relieved and thankful that her mother had not revealed anything, Rose asked Jessie where she lived.

'Over by Victoria Park. I'll write the address down and leave it on the dresser.' Pulling her hair back, Jessie pushed in a comb. 'Do you think you might visit her then?'

'I don't know. It's been a bit of a shock, one way and another.'

'Yes, but will you go?'

'*Yes*, Jessie. I will go. When I'm good and ready.' Rose refused to say another word on the subject.

Chapter Seven

When the day came for Jessie to go and see Max's mother and sister, there was a worried knot inside her stomach. Why had she agreed to this farce? She had no intention of changing religion and her original reason for saying she would go was to find out exactly what was on Moira's mind. As far as Jessie was concerned, Moira was at the bottom of this sudden problem which had little to do with her being a Christian and Max a Jew. Moira's sights were set higher for her brother.

Turning into the street where Max lived, Jessie braced herself for a confrontation and hoped that she was wrong and that they *were* thinking of her and Max's welfare and whether they would be able to adjust to the trials and tribulations of a mixed marriage, as Max had said. She rang the doorbell and was disappointed that it was 28-year-old Moira who answered the door and not her mother. Jessie liked Mrs Cohen, they had always got on from the time she was small and used to pop in to what was then her grandfather's shoe menders, to help polish boots.

'You're early, Jessie. I've only just got here,' said Moira brightly. 'Come in, come in.' Jessie checked her wristwatch; it was five to ten in the morning, she was just five minutes early.

With her hair set and lacquered, her make-up perfect, Moira looked glamorous next to Jessie, who had her hair tied back and

apart from a smear of lipstick was wearing no make-up. Gliding through the passage and into the small back room where Max's parents spent most of their time, Moira pulled out a chair from under the small gate-leg table. In her bright orange and green frock and chiffon neckerchief, she looked as if she was ready to go to the theatre, but this was nothing unusual because she always looked smart and dressy.

Since it was Saturday Jessie was wearing slacks and a puff-sleeved blouse; she shouldn't have felt too casually dressed for the occasion, but she did. Before sitting down, she made a quick check of her nails to make sure her clear varnish hadn't chipped. Her confidence had begun to wane.

'I'm sorry if I'm too early, Moira. I must have walked too quickly,' she said. 'I meant to get here on the dot.'

'Not to worry, darling. I'll put the kettle on, but if you don't mind my passing on a bit of friendly advice, it's better to arrive five minutes late than five minutes early. I don't mind, of course, but you never know how your hostess might react. Some people might think it impolite.'

Settling herself in the newly decorated room, Jessie admired the pale pink and green flowery wallpaper. 'It's very quiet, Moira,' she said. 'Where's your mum?'

'My mother's had to go and see Auntie Becky,' she said. 'Auntie Becky gets headaches when she feels like it and has us all running round after her.'

Glancing at the spread on the table, Jessie thought it didn't look as if Moira had just arrived. A try was set with two bone china cups and saucers and there were smoked salmon bagels on a plate. Jessie could smell cigarette smoke in the air and more than one had been smoked if the glass and chrome ashtry was anything to go by. Neither Max nor his parents were smokers.

'My father's at the synagogue, Jessie, before you ask. He spends most of Saturday there.' Scooping up the ashtray, she went through into the adjoining kitchen and tipped the evidence into a small cream pedal bin. Jessie knew Moira's secret. They

all knew Moira's secret and she knew they all knew but liked to pretend that she didn't know they all knew. That was Moira.

She put the kettle on and came back into the room.

'And Max is keeping out of the way while you and I argue religion' said Jessie.

'I hope that isn't what my brother said, Jessie. He knows I wouldn't dream of such a thing. Arguing over religion? I don't think so.'

'I was only joking, Moira, trying to lighten things, before we start discussing it.'

'Oh?' Moira raised an inquiring eyebrow.

'I'm sure God must have had a sense of humour. He would have had to, wouldn't he, if he really *can* see each and every one of us every second of the day – and what we get up to.'

'Yes, dear, if you say so, although I don't think your priest would think much of—'

'Vicar. Catholics have priests. We have vicars.'

'Of course, of course,' she said, shrugging it off in typical Moira style. She never admitted she was wrong.

'I wonder what Jesus would have made of Mosley and his little army of Blackshirts. I suppose in a way the Fascists could be seen in the same light as the Roman army. They wanted to change the world as well.' Moira's confidence and self-possession always made Jessie react by showing off – she couldn't help it.

Moira frowned. 'We don't mention that name in this house.'

Jessie wasn't sure if she was referring to Mosley or Jesus. 'Sorry. I wasn't thinking. How's your hubby then?' she said, trying to warm her future sister-in-law.

'Nathan is very well, thank you. He's just been promoted, as a matter of fact. Area manager. We're very pleased. Very proud. The company he works for are enjoying a boom y[illegible]'

'That's nice. It couldn't have been much fun for him, going round knocking on people's doors, trying to get blood out of

a stone. The tally man's not that popular round this way. Not when it comes to paying out.'

'Nathan wasn't a tally man, dear,' said Moira. 'He was a debt collector. But you're right, he's much happier and far more suited to an office. He had to do the street rounds first – ground work. It's company policy to begin at the grass roots. Now he's got a beautiful desk to sit behind. Antique. He's very keen on antiques.' Moira got up to get the kettle. 'Personally I prefer Art and Craft. Our flat in Stamford Hill looks very different from this house. Not that my parents have antiques, of course. What do you think of the decorating? Nathan paid good decorators to come in once the house was wired for electricity. Does your house still have gas lighting, dear?'

'No, not any more.' Jessie bristled under Moira's air of superiority.

'That's nice. So . . .' Moira poured boiling water from the kettle into the coffee pot. 'I hear that you want to marry into our family, Jessie. Is that right?'

'I thought that was why you wanted to see me. I thought you knew that Max has been paying off for an engagement ring. His idea, not mine. He'd like us to get married early next year, which is why I don't think our little talk about my changing religion will have much point. It takes years of studying and practice, from what I've heard.'

'You surprise me, Jessie.' Moira sat down and placed a cup of tea in front of Jessie. 'Help yourself to milk and sugar. The milk is fresh.'

'Why do I surprise you?'

'Well,' Moira laid the flat of her hand against her breast, 'you know what they're like.' She flapped her hand. 'Men and their hearts. My brother was always one for the girls but I would have expected him to have grown out of that if he did have marriage on his mind. Seriously on his mind, that is.'

'So you don't think he has then? Grown out of it?' Jessie said, frowning.

'No, darling, I don't. He thinks the world of you, sure, but Max, settling down? I don't think so. Not for a few years in any case.'

This conversation was not what Jessie had been expecting. 'But if he's not ready for marriage why would he be buying me a diamond engagement ring?'

'Zircon, dear. I'm sure it's a lovely dress ring. Beautiful. But a diamond? Max isn't earning a fortune – yet.'

'It is a diamond, Moira. He pointed it out to me and said it was a diamond. He's not a liar, your brother. You must know that.'

Moira shrugged and lowered her eyelids. 'So he has dreams bigger than his wallet. Most young men do these days. In many ways Max is immature, although I wouldn't want him to know I said that. I worship the ground he walks on. He's a prince among men as far as I'm concerned. But then, I'm family.'

Determined not to be put down, Jessie straightened and looked her in the eye. 'He's been paying off for the ring for months and I don't think he's a prince among men, he's just an ordinary feller who I happen to love. And he's not immature, far from it.' Now it was Jessie's turn to sound smug, 'You can trust me on that one.' Seeing Moira's expression change from complacent superiority to discomfort was worth putting up with all her condescension.

'Of course,' said Moira, recovering herself, 'you should know best.'

'I feel bad now,' said Jessie, play-acting, 'telling you about the ring. I thought you knew.' She playfully pointed a finger. 'You crafty cow, Moira, you wormed it out of me.'

'I didn't exactly have to *prise* it out of you, Jessie. You must be very careful about bragging.'

'Anyway,' said Jessie, biting her tongue, 'what *did* you want to talk to me about? Max said it was to discuss Judaism and Christianity.' She looked into Moira's face. 'What's this all about?'

'Goodness, you have changed. You mustn't be so harsh, but then, poor darling, you have been through a very difficult time. If I may give you another little bit of advice,' she leaned forward and pulled a strange face, 'don't get bitter. It would be such a shame. You're a lovely girl.' She leaned back again and smiled benignly. 'I just wanted us to have a little chat, that's all. We never seem to see each other, and yes,' she said, lighting a cigarette, 'I have been concerned about the differences in Max's life and yours. Most of our friends are Yiddish. Everything we do is Yiddish. It's very unusual for a Jew and a Christian to become sweethearts, very unusual. We're a tight-knit community. Family and friends don't like it if one of us marries out.' She leaned forward again, resting an elbow on the table and admiring her red nail varnish.

'You're a sweetheart, Jessie, and we think the world of you, don't get me wrong. But marriage?' She reached out and opened a drawer in the table. 'Here, let me show you something.' She withdrew a few photographs. 'This one is of Cousin Harry's bar mitzvah, taken last year. I'm sure Max told you about it. This is the world you would be marrying into. We Cohens are a very traditional family. Now, can you see yourself fitting into that scene? You, with your lovely blonde hair, blue eyes and pale skin, you would stand out like a sore thumb. You see what I mean?'

This was like Hitler in reverse. 'You're saying that I wouldn't fit in because of my appearance?'

'Now you're being silly. Of course I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is that you should think seriously about it. Would you be happy? Or a fish out of water?'

Jessie studied the photograph and could see what she was getting at. 'I wouldn't *have* to go to bar mitzvahs,' she said, shrugging, 'although if I saw Max wearing a skull cap, I must admit I might laugh until I got used to it.'

'You *would*?'

'Yes, Moira, I probably would. I'm sorry if it offends you.'

'You know what I think? I think you should come to a Friday night Sabbath. Take supper with us next Friday.'

'When Max will wear a skull cap.'

Moira bowed her head, smiling. 'When Max will wear a skull cap.'

'You want me to laugh at him. In front of everyone.'

'You're sharper than you make out, Jessie, even if you are wrong. As if I would want you to laugh at my brother.' She placed a red painted fingernail on the photograph and tapped it. 'I think he looks charming.'

'Is that Max?' said Jessie, seeing him in a different light.

'Of course it is. You don't recognise him?'

'The girl next to him, the redhead, is she one of your cousins?'

'No, darling.' Moira quietly chuckled. 'No, that's Sadie and Bernard Marcovitch's daughter. The Marcovitches are very close family friends. Max has known Sarah for as long as I can remember. They practically grew up together. I would have thought he'd have mentioned her. Everyone said they would get married. Look at this picture.' She showed Jessie another and then another and another. 'Look at the two of them in this one. Dancing the Charleston as if there weren't any troubles in this crazy world of ours. Look, here's another.'

The next photograph was Moira's trump card and Jessie reacted exactly as she had hoped. It was a picture of Max kissing the very attractive redhead on the mouth, and it shocked Jessie. Shocked her to the core. It was a very recent photograph.

'Such a beautiful girl,' said Moira. 'You see what I mean? They fall at his feet, but this one he likes. As you can tell. Isn't that a lovely gown?'

'So this is what Max gets up to behind my back. Well, if that's how you lot behave, to be honest with you, Moira, I wouldn't want to marry into your family. Not for all the money in China.' Suddenly filled with rage, Jessie snatched the kissing photograph and ripped it to bits. 'Show that to Max.

Tell him that's what I think of him – and of you for going behind his back.'

Half running, Jessie left the house and made her way home, too shocked and too angry to cry. Max had been leading a double life, laughing and dancing and kissing other girls. She thought about the gifts that he'd bought for her; she would collect them together, pack them all into a shopping bag and throw them at him.

Stopping to draw breath, Jessie leaned on a lamppost, unable to believe what she had seen and what she had heard. Of course she knew about the family celebrations to which she hadn't been invited; she had understood at the time. She had never expected Max to attend a family christening with her or go to church for midnight mass on Christmas Eve or be there for the carol service, but she hadn't expected him to be trifling with other women at his family functions.

Slamming the front door shut, Jessie ran upstairs to her bedroom and banged around, opening and shutting drawers and cupboards until she'd found the gifts Max had given her. She would show him what she thought of his womanising.

She sat on the edge of her bed and remembered her lovely engagement ring, sparkling in the window. She looked at her naked finger and felt like weeping. Feeling desperately alone, she realised just how badly she missed her dad. She so wanted to hear his comforting voice telling her that it would all sort itself out and that she had overreacted to a jealous sister. She wanted her dad to tell her that Max wasn't a ladies' man but a good, loyal boyfriend, compassionate and understanding. She looked at the presents, half in, half out of the shopping bag. She glanced at his love letters on the dressing table tied with ribbon. Had they been full of romantic fantasies instead of genuine love? Then the photograph came back to her again and her anger returned. She *would* take them back. She had every right to be angry and every right to let him know that she was angry.

Grabbing the bag, she rushed downstairs and out of the

house, slamming the door behind her. She wanted her mother, Dolly, and the boys to know that she was upset and angry. She would tell them all about it later.

Rose called her name from the sitting room window and Jessie glanced up. Dolly was there too. Ignoring them both, Jessie strode off back to Max's house.

'All right, Jessie love?' A neighbour was scrubbing her doorstep. 'You look as if you've lost half-a-crown and found a penny!'

Jessie ran on, weaving and shoving her way through shoppers and those out for a Saturday browse on a sunny June day.

This time it was Max who answered the door.

'Here, you can have these back,' she snapped. 'I don't want them! Give them to the girl in the photograph. The one you were kissing! You cheat! You liar!' Furious, she threw the bag at his feet and turned away, forcing herself not to run. She would keep some dignity at least.

She had expected and hoped to hear Max calling after her, but he didn't. By the time she reached home, Jessie was more upset than angry. Finding Rose waiting for her, she burst into tears.

'What's going on Jessie? Dolly saw you rush out earlier. What's happened?'

'*Max*. That's what's happened! Good old trustworthy *Max*.'

'I thought it might have been. You've had a lovers' tiff. Come on. Come in the kitchen and tell me all about it. What's he done?'

It wasn't until she had a cup of tea in front of her that Jessie finally poured out her troubles. 'All that Max said was that his sister wanted me to go round there to discuss religion. To see if I could be persuaded to change.'

'To Jewish,' said Rose, knowingly.

'But that's *not* what it was about.' She explained what Moira had done and then waited for her mother's angry reaction.

'And that's all?' said Rose. 'That's what this is about? A photograph?'

'It was enough. Moira was trying to tell me something, something that Max couldn't bring himself to admit. I don't fit into the family. I'd be the odd man out.'

'I can't say I'm that surprised, Jessie,' said Rose quietly. 'Your dad was a bit concerned that you might have married and then had regrets. As nice as Max and his family are, they do things differently from us. I'm fond of his parents, you know I am, we've been friends for years. I couldn't have wished for nicer people to work next door to, but they have different ways to us. No better, no worse, just different.'

'But I thought you were all for it. Suddenly everyone thinks it's wrong. This is the first time it's come up. Why, all of a sudden, are me and Max not suited? Has something happened that I don't know about?' Jessie looked wretched.

'No, of course not.'

'It's all this Blackshirt business,' said Jessie. 'That's what's doing it. We're all turning against each other. We were never like this before. Did you ever know Stepney people to be like this?'

'You and Max are from different backgrounds, that's all. Very different backgrounds. I expect his sister was just letting you know what lay in store, that it wouldn't be easy for either of you.' Rose paused and then shook her head. 'Showing you a photo of Max with another woman wasn't the way to go about it. That was very hurtful.'

'I hate her for that. I do. I *hate* her. Once Max drags the truth out of her, he'll be livid. When he does come round to apologise for Moira – which should be any time now – will you let him come up to my bedroom, just this once?' Jessie pleaded, hoping her mother would understand how important this was.

'Did he say he was coming round?' asked Rose.

'No. But he will once he knows what's happened. He looked really hurt when I threw his gifts back at him. So will it be all

right then? If he comes into my bedroom? I'll leave the door open, if it bothers you.'

'You can go into the sitting room, Jessie. I'll make sure no one disturbs you. That way you can have the door shut and there'll be no risk of the boys hearing your private conversation. Your bedroom's not the place, it wouldn't be right. Once you've made up, things might get out of hand. I trust Max with you, we've always trusted him to behave properly but—'

'You don't want us doing things we shouldn't.'

'I'm not saying that you would—'

'We already have, that's what makes it worse,' Jessie blurted impulsively.

The look of shock on Rose's face brought Jessie to her senses. What was she doing? Why had she said it? There was no stopping now, she would have to go on. 'We have been courting for two years, Mum, and we did plan to marry.'

It hadn't crossed Rose's mind that her seventeen-year-old daughter might have already tasted the forbidden fruits. 'I hope you're not saying that you've let him go all the way?'

Jessie could feel her cheeks burning. 'Well, no ... not all the way.' If there was a time to lie, thought Jessie, this was it.

'Gracious me,' said Rose, pressing a hand against her bosom and taking a deep breath. 'Thank goodness your father isn't here to listen to this.' She stood up and turned her back on Jessie. 'I think you'd best go to your room now, Jessie.'

'We've been going out together for two years! Didn't you and Dad ever think that we might have ... well ... you know?'

'Please, Jessie. I don't like this kind of talk. You should know that.'

'You're not being fair! I've seen your marriage certificate and I know that you were pregnant with me before you and Dad got married. That never bothered me so why should Max and me have to wait?'

There was a pause, while Rose collected herself. 'We'll talk

about it another time.' She had no intention of doing so. It had been distressing enough to hear her daughter speak so casually about her own guilty secret, her and Robert's secret. The last thing she wanted was to have her own past picked over as some sort of point of comparison.

Later, in her room, Jessie started to cry. Soon Max would come round and make her feel better, she felt sure of it. Then she would apologise to her mother who was far too strait-laced to discuss sex with anyone, even her own daughter. She had shocked Rose and now she would have to lie her way out of it and try and get things back to where they were before she made that damning confession. She would say that she was still a virgin.

After several nights of crying herself to sleep, Jessie realised that Max wasn't going to appear, he wouldn't be coming round to say that Moira was wrong and that it had all been something out of nothing. Jessie hadn't realised just how much she would miss his friendly face and comforting ways. It was as if a part of herself had been taken away.

Dolly, Alfie and Stephen were being kind to her, which made it worse. Rose knew what Jessie was going through but was helpless to do anything about it; her daughter was going to have to be brave and face facts. Max, for whatever reason, was not going to run to her and she would have to go back and apologise for her behaviour if all was to be saved.

Eventually, Jessie decided she had to stop crying. It wasn't fair. Passing her mother's bedroom, she had seen Rose sitting on the edge of the big double bed holding a pair of her father's pyjamas which she had kept back. There had been other things, too, to remind them – a letter through the post addressed to him, one of his socks turning up in the wash or under the bed.

Going into the sitting room, she found Rose sewing a patchwork cushion. 'I'm going to make a pot of tea, Mum. Do you want a cup?'

Rose looked up at her and nodded. 'That would be nice. What time is it?'

Glancing at the hall clock, Jessie told her it was half past four. 'Shall I call the boys in for a wash before tea? They're in the street playing football.'

'No, leave them for a while,' said Rose. 'Stephen's fulfilling your dad's wishes at last, we don't want to spoil that. Give them another half-hour.' She laid down her sewing and rubbed her eyes. 'I've given myself a headache with this tiny stitchwork. Pull the curtains across, would you, Jess? I'll stop in here for twenty minutes or so. I expect it'll pass once I've sipped a warm drink and closed my eyes.'

Back in her own bedroom, sitting on her bed and drinking her cup of tea, Jessie ran it all through her mind again: Moira; the photos; their talk. Perhaps her pride had made her see things in a worse light than intended. But she had thought about it every night and arrived at the same conclusion. It was over, and while Moira's methods had been underhand, she was right about the reasons. That hadn't stopped Jessie from missing Max. They had been seeing each other for so long that he really had become an important part of her life. She likened it to losing her dad. She was grieving for two men who had meant everything.

Sally had been a godsend. It was her shoulder that Jessie had cried on in the office, she who had patiently listened to the story about Moira over and over again; she who had many times heard how all Jessie's plans for a future with Max would now come to nothing.

The one thing that had struck Jessie was something that Sally had said in the canteen the day before, on Friday: 'Jess, you do realise that not once, through all of this, have you mentioned the word love.' And she'd been right. They had gone on to discuss love and what love actually was. Sally had said, 'You just *know*, Jess. There's no other way of describing it.'

Their tête-à-tête in the canteen had been the reason why Jessie had at last come out of herself. She had hidden herself

away almost every evening since she and Max had split up. Now she was back in her room again, drinking her tea alone, but for a different reason – she *wanted* to be by herself. It was as simple as that.

With her pillows propped behind her, Jessie listened to the children in the street. The boys were playing football and the girls were enjoying a game of skipping. She could hear their chant and it took her back to when she had done the very same thing out there in that same street. Lighter inside, she sang along with them:

> All come in together,
> Never mind the weather,
> When the wind begins to blow,
> We'll all go out together ...'

'Jess? Are you asleep in there?' Rose sounded timid by comparison to the woman she had once been. A wave of guilt swept over Jessie. She slipped her legs off the bed and sat up, determined to turn over a new leaf, for the sake of herself and everyone around her. She pushed her hand through her long unbrushed hair and braced herself, ready to be the person she was before she broke up with Max.

'Jessie? Your friend's downstairs. Shall I ask her to come in or would you rather I made an excuse? It's Sally from work.'

'Sally?' Jess was off the bed in a flash and opening her door. 'I'll come down,' she said, smiling.

'Oh, that's better, Jessie. Much better. You have bucked up. The boys are just in and the table's laid with sandwiches and some cake. If your friend wants to come in and—'

Jessie placed her hands on Rose's shoulders. 'Mum, it's over. I'm not going to mope around any more so you can stop worrying about me. Next week, we'll go to see a show, a really good, old-fashioned variety show. Something for all of us.'

'That would be a tonic, Jessie, I must say.' There was a genuine smile on Rose's face too.

'Good. I'll have my tea later. Will it be all right if Sally comes into my room for a short while?' Rose had never encouraged any of her children to have friends in, especially not in the bedrooms.

'I should think so. There's a bottle of lemonade downstairs, Sally might be thirsty after her walk. It's very hot and dry out there.'

Jessie went downstairs to greet her friend, feeling much lighter inside. Maybe she would go out with Sally for a drink that evening.

'Blimey, Jessikins,' exclaimed Sally, 'you look a right two and eight. I think it's time you went to the hairdressers', you need a style and set. Still, not much we can do about that now except to sweep it all up on top and put some lacquer on. Hurry up, we're going out.'

'I haven't got any lacquer, Sally. I don't use it. It's like glue.'

'I'm sure it is, but who cares so long as it does the trick. You'll have to do something with it, and you could put a bit of lipstick on.'

'Where are we going?' Jessie's spirits began to rise. Sally always cheered her up.

'Anywhere. I don't care. After our little chat yesterday, I thought it was time you had an outing. Can I come in then? Or you gonna leave me standing on the doorstep like a stray cat?'

'Of course you can come in but do we have to go out? Can't we just sit on my bed and talk?'

'No, we bleedin' well can't. We've done enough of that. You and Max are finished, it's past 'istory. Now go and do something with yerself, can't go for a drive with the chaps looking like a dog's dinner.'

A frown swept across Jessie's face. 'What chaps?'

'Tom's been driving me round the bend and up the wall.

He wants to see yer. Him and Ron 'ave bought a car between 'em, an old banger they've named Susie. They 'ave to get out and push it now and then, but it goes all right for a good few miles. They want us to go out together. Tonight. They're outside, waiting for an answer, but Tom wants to have a little chat with you first. Me and Ron'll go for stroll while you get on with it. Well, go on then. Move yerself!'

'You shouldn't have done this, Sally. You shouldn't have brought him round here. It's not clever.'

'Couldn't stop 'im. He'd found out where you lived anyway and you know how he feels about yer. Once I told him you was finished with Max,' she shrugged, 'well, there ain't no keeping him down now. His ol' green eyes lit up, they did.'

'You *shouldn't* have told him. I asked you *not* to! It's none of his business.'

'Oh, shut up and brush yer bloomin' hair. Fink yourself lucky that someone as 'andsome as Tom fancies yer. Mind you, he might not if he sees you looking like this, like something the cat dragged in.'

'Well, we'll see just how much he likes me for myself then, won't we?' Not caring about her long unbrushed hair or pale face with no rouge or lipstick, Jessie strode out of the house, leaving Sally to go inside and drive Rose mad with her incessant chatter.

Striding up to an old black car, Jessie wrenched the door open and sat on the badly worn and cracked leather seat, staring ahead, waiting to hear what Tom had to say for himself. Since Max, she trusted no man to be honest.

'What do you want, Jess?' The voice was familiar, but it wasn't Tom's. It was one of her childhood friends, Freddy Knight. 'I'm just off to pick up me girl,' he said, worried.

What could she say? There were two other motors parked further along the road. She cursed Sally. Why hadn't she described what Tom's car looked like?

'Sorry, Freddy. I've got in the wrong car,' she said. 'What's

he gonna think of me, Freddy? That must be the one, that old thing along the road. Help me out, Freddy. Drive off or something, anything.'

'Don't be silly. Get out now and tell him you needed to have a word with me. Go on, make him jealous – us blokes love it.'

'Do you?' Jessie said. 'Well, us girls don't. I broke up with Max because of something like that.'

'Well, that's a typical woman for you. Jess? You're feeling all right, ain't you?'

'Of course I'm all right, why shouldn't I be?' She didn't move. 'I didn't mean to suggest that *your* car's an old banger, by the way. I just wasn't thinking when I got in.'

'Well, you'd best start now, before he pulls away, before that little bit of jealousy turns into something else. Go on. Don't get in the black car, that belongs to Mr Allen, the credit man. He's paying his weekly visit to Merry Widow Jackson. The next one along's got two blokes in it.'

'That'll be them.'

'Right. Good. So you'll be off then? Only I've got to pick up my bird now.' He looked at his wristwatch. 'I'm already late. We're meant to be going to Epping Forest . . . for a picnic.' He grinned, winking at her.

Jessie managed a smile and climbed out.

'Have a good time,' said Freddy.

Waving him off, she saw that he was laughing to himself inside the car. She couldn't blame him, it must have looked funny from where he was sitting.

She walked the few steps to Tom and Ron's car and bent down to speak to Tom through the open window of the back seat. She felt a rush of that old familiar black magic as he looked into her eyes and smiled. 'Sally said you wanted to have a word with me. Well, here I am.'

Tom blew a smoke ring, 'What did you get in that car for?'

'Freddy's a mate, I was passing on a message from another friend,' Jessie lied smoothly. 'Why?'

'Just wondered, that's all.'

Ron was out of the car in a flash. 'I'll, er, I'll take a stroll with Sally and leave the pair of you to it. All right if I knock on your door, Jessie?'

'I suppose so. But don't go in. Mum's not up to it.'

Tom looked at Jessie. 'You gonna get in then or what?'

'No. What do you want?'

Laughing quietly at them, Ron walked away. 'Ten minutes and I'll be back with Sally,' he said.

Tom cleared his throat and Jessie could see she was annoying him.

'What does Hannah think of your car, then?' she asked. 'Or wouldn't your girlfriend be seen dead in it?'

Leaning back and stretching one arm, he groaned deliberately. 'She's not my girlfriend. I like your hair like that, Jessie, it suits you. All free and easy. Pity about your charm though, that seems to have vanished. I remember the first time I saw you, outside Stepney Green station, looking sad. Then there was the dockers' march when you were smiling and lovely. How would your dad feel, I wonder, if he could see you now, acting like this? He'd be gutted, I reckon,' Tom chattered on, 'knowing his accident had changed you. His Jessie, his lovely girl, all nasty and bad-tempered. Now get in the car and do as you're told.' He moved along the seat to make room for her.

'Bloody cheek. Who d'you think you are?' she said pulling at the door and bouncing down onto the badly sprung back seat. She slammed the door shut.

'Jessie, stop play-acting. It's not clever and it don't suit you.'

'I wasn't play-acting,' she said quietly. Any mention of her father still upset her.

'Yes you were. Right,' He drew on his cigarette. 'Let's start again. I'm sorry I let you down that time, all right? I wanted to see you but I couldn't. I just couldn't get there. Don't ask me why.'

'Why?'

'Very funny,' he said, trying not to smile. 'Anyway, we're together now, in this motor and I'll say it just once, and then it's up to you. You can laugh or listen. I've not been able to get you out of my mind. Simple as that. You drive me mad, always there, when I fall asleep and when I wake up. Thank Christ I don't dream or I'd never be free of you. I knew you was getting engaged so I kept away. But once Sally told me it was off, that was it. Now if you're not interested, fair enough, just say the word and you won't hear from me again.'

Jessie looked away from him, out of the window, and went quiet. 'Don't put up much of a fight, do you?'

'I've got my pride. Anyway, I think you feel the same whether you like it or not, but if, for some reason, you want to fight it, I won't stop you. Maybe you don't think I'm good enough to meet the rest of your family. Who knows? With someone like you it could be any daft thing. And you don't have to worry about Hannah being competition, if that's what's on your mind.' He looked straight at her. 'She's a very close friend, right?'

'I'm sure. I thought my last boyfriend was honest, but I found out different.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'So can I take it that you'll go out with me?'

'Hannah could come with us, you must have plenty of friends who would jump at the chance. We could go on a foursome, couldn't we? Or would that be too much for you to bear, seeing her in another bloke's arms?'

Tom pushed his chin forward defiantly and tried to keep calm. Jessie had, after all, been through two losses, her dad and her fiancé. She was bound to be bitter. 'No, he said, thoughtfully. 'It wouldn't work. She's too much like a sister, I'd feel uncomfortable.'

'I bet you would.'

'Best forget it altogether.' He leaned across her, pushed open the door and waited for her to get out.

'Who said I was going?' She raised her eyes and saw the stony expression on his face. She knew she was pushing her luck. 'I'm sorry. You were right. I *was* acting up.'

He pulled the door shut again. 'Why?'

'I don't know. I'm a bit confused and ... I can't be sure about you and Hannah. I don't want to barge in and break something that's good. You do get on really well and I like her a lot. I mean that, I'm not just saying it.'

'I can see that. Would you sooner I went away?'

'No.' She struggled to find the right words but it wasn't easy. 'Look,' she finally said, 'something did happen between us. I don't know if it was the first time we met or on the dockers' march, and I don't want you to think I'm saying this because I'm on the rebound ...'

'Go on.' His voice had changed, he sounded more serious, older.

'Well, I have thought about you, probably more than I should have. When I saw Hannah coming into the hospital when I was visiting you, well, I was jealous. I had no right to be, but I was.'

Tom's face lit up with both relief and joy. 'Jessie, Jessie, Jessie.' He pushed his hand through his fair hair. 'I'm crazy about you! I thought you didn't care.'

'Why else would I have agreed to go out with you in the first place? I was nearly engaged, don't forget. I'm not the sort that two-times. You can imagine how I felt when you didn't turn up.'

'Good. I'm glad you're not a two-timer, because I would hate to share you with anyone.' He gently pulled her close to him. 'I think I love you, Jessie Warner,' he said, crossing a bridge he had not crossed before. He had often said he was in love but had never declared it to the girl in question.

'I don't think I know what love is, Tom.' Jessie's heart was thumping as she spoke.

'I do, now.' He kissed her softly on the lips and very, very

slowly, they moved closer together until his arms were holding her tight and their bodies were touching. Jessie responded in a way she had never responded to Max. This was different. Very different. She felt her body stir, come alive; every part of her seemed to be gently throbbing. Her breathing changed and her heart beat even faster.

Freeing his lips from hers, Tom gazed into her face. 'I'm putting my trust in you . . . I hope you don't leave me a broken man.' His voice was deep and husky.

'I won't hurt you, Tom. I'm not a heart-breaker.' There was a slight tremble to her voice which was nothing compared to the way she was trembling inside. 'I don't know what's happening to me,' she said. 'You make me feel different.'

Laughing at her, Tom stroked her face, her beautiful face. 'I don't know when it happened, Jess. Maybe the first time I saw you – who cares? Who cares when it was, how it was, what it was. I've never been this scared before. You frighten the life out of me. I suppose it's happened at last – you've bowled me over.' He narrowed his green eyes and grinned at her. 'You've made me love you.'

'I made *you* love *me*? And what have you done to me? Cast your spell over me, that's what.'

'Maybe. But I'll say this much, I won't hurt you, Jessie. I'll never hurt you. I'm yours for as long as you want me. I don't know how long that'll be, maybe for ever or maybe for a while, until you go off with someone else or back to your boyfriend. You might break my heart but I'm willing to take that risk.'

'You can stop thinking that way. I've never felt like this before. You make me angry, you make me laugh, I like quarrelling with you . . .'

'And I want to squeeze you to death,' he said. 'Squeeze the life out of you and keep it for ever.'

Tearing herself away from his embrace, Jessie kissed him on the cheek. 'I'd better go back inside. Sally's waiting and Mum'll be worried.'

'So shall we all meet up tonight then?'

'I don't think I can cope with it, Tom. You, me, Sally and Ron, I've been through a lot during the past couple of weeks. All I want to do is be alone and think about us. I suppose that sounds daft.'

'No. I know what you mean,' he said, taking a very deep breath. 'So, how about if I pick you up tomorrow? We can go for a drive – or we could go dancing. You name it.'

'Let's just wait and see how we feel. Come round tomorrow at seven, then we'll decide.'

'Whatever you say, Jess, whatever you say.'

They sat there for a few moments, neither saying anything, until Jessie broke the silence.

'But how would that look? Sally and Ron are expecting us to go out with them.'

'That was the idea,' he said, 'but actually I don't wanna share you with anyone right now. I wouldn't be able to take my eyes off you – or keep my hands off you, come to that. Go on, out you get. Too much too soon. And don't slam the door, it might fall off.'

Laughing, she got out and walked slowly away, knowing his eyes were on her and loving every second. *Now* she knew. Now she knew what love was.

'Is he your new boyfriend then?' She could hear Stephen's small voice but she was on another planet. 'I liked Max. He never 'ad a car but he brought us sweets and played cards with us. You never gonna go out with 'im again then? Jessie? *Jessie!*'

His penetrating voice brought her back to earth. Stephen was sitting on the front step, cupping his chin with both hands. 'Max is all right, Stephen,' she said. 'We'll still see him, he's a family friend, he's bound to come and visit ... and play cards.'

'But you won't kiss 'im on the doorstep no more?'

'No, I won't kiss him on the doorstep no more. Me and Max'll always be friends though, I hope. You know what I reckon? I reckon he's found something out. He kissed another

girl and he found something out.' She was thinking about herself and Tom and what they had just discovered.

'So he won't be sad then?'

'No, he won't be sad.'

'What did he find out?'

'That even though he liked me a lot, I wasn't the right one for him.'

'And that man in the car. Is he the right one for you?' Stephen looked sideways at Jessie. 'You gonna marry 'im?'

Laughing, she put her arm around his shoulders. 'I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we? Now then, how about you running down to Riley's and buying some twisted cough candy for all of us?'

'I've gone off it. What about if we wait for the toffee apple man? He'll be round soon.'

'All right, but how about if you nip down to Riley's first and get me tuppenny worth of snowfruits.'

'Don't mind.'

'Well, go on then. Take a shilling out of my purse. It's in my handbag on my bed, and don't go pinching any of my sweets before you get back with them.'

'Course not,' he said, rushing into the house. When he got to the stairs, he turned round. 'Can I 'ave a ride in his car one day?'

'We'll 'ave to wait and see. See how well you do at school now that you've been moved down the front of the classroom. See if it really was poor eyesight or laziness that got you bad marks.'

'It was! I do try hard!'

It would have been nice if she could have believed him, but quietly, in her own way, Jessie had been testing Stephen, without him knowing. From what she could tell, there wasn't much wrong with his eyesight. Her brother had a way of winding people round his little finger to get what he wanted. But then no one was perfect.

Catching sight of her reflection in the oval mirror in the

hall, Jessie could see that Sally had a point; she looked terrible, her hair was too long and straggly and it was out of style. She placed her hands on either side of her face to see what she might look like with short hair. She liked what she imagined, and she knew exactly where her mother's sharp scissors were.

Wasting no time, Jessie went into the sitting room and to Rose's sewing box. Lifting the heavy steel scissors, she hid them between the folds of her cotton skirt and went to her room, closing the door behind her and wedging a chair under the handle, in case she was disturbed.

Holding the scissors just above her shoulders, she cut a straight line. As the thick chunk of wavy blonde hair slid down her front to the floor, she suddenly had second thoughts. She had had long hair since she was a small child. But it was too late for regrets, and she had to work quickly, before Dolly demanded to be let in.

Using her hand mirror to cut round the back, she concentrated and kept a keen eye as she snipped away, first one side and towards the back, and then the other. The crunching sound as the blades cut through her hair gave her goosebumps. What would Rose say? Facing front again she was mortified to see that one side was much shorter than the other. She carefully snipped the longer side but still it wasn't even. She snipped again. Now it was shorter than the other side. Panic set in.

She threw the scissors onto the bed, kicked all her thick hair underneath it, cleaned up the dressing table and put on her hat. She pulled the rim down as far as it would go.

She crept down the stairs and managed to get out of the house without being seen or heard and she walked very quickly, her head down, hiding her face until she arrived at the local salon. She looked furtively through the window. The hairdressers were all busy cutting or setting, and two more customers were waiting for curlers to be taken out.

Leaning on the wall between the salon and barber shop, she wished away the past hour. What had she been been thinking?

If only she hadn't picked up those scissors! How could she go on her first date with Tom the next day looking as if rats had been at her hair?

She covered her face with her hands as she felt tears sting her eyes.

'The hat pulled down is a dead give-away, young Jessie.' It was Maurice Simons, the barber.

'I cut my own hair,' she said tearfully. It's a mess.'

'You're not the first. Come on in. I'll call my wife down and she'll take you upstairs to our flat. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll come up. I'll give you a short back and sides,' he joked.

'Oh, Maurice, if you could get one of the hairdressers to—'

'You should be so lucky. On a Saturday she wants a hairdo on demand. Today you will have to settle for me.'

'But you're a barber, you cut men's hair and you use a razor. I don't want short back and sides, Maurice.' She shuddered at the thought of it.

'Come with me. Upstairs – before you draw a bloody crowd.'

Ignoring the cheeky asides from the male customers in his shop, Jessie followed Maurice through a small doorway and upstairs. 'I only meant to give it a trim,' she said.

'Sarah!' Maurice called to his wife who was in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. 'You remember when our Ruth got hold of my scissors?'

'Could I ever forget!' she yelled back. 'Why aren't you cutting hair? It's a holiday all of a sudden?'

'We have a private customer!' Flapping a hand and rolling his eyes, Maurice took off Jessie's hat. 'Well, at least you haven't shorn the lot. With this I can do something. Come and see, Sarah.'

'My God. What have you done?' Sarah stood in the entrance to their flat, a hand over her mouth. 'Does your mother know about this, Jessie?'

'Leave her alone, woman. Hasn't she got enough to worry about? Of course her mother doesn't know. Rose would go potty.'

'I was trying to give myself a new look.'

'Sit her in front of the mirror, Maurie. I'll fetch your scissors and a towel.' She went back into the kitchen, smiling to herself.

'So, madam,' he said, sitting her down and speaking to her reflection in the mirror, 'you want the new style, yes?'

She nodded and managed a faint smile. 'I'm not sure about a fringe though.'

He pushed his fingers through her hair and tousled it. 'No. Your face wouldn't suit a fringe. I think you should keep the side parting.'

'Oh, I thought the new style needed a middle parting.' She was disappointed and a touch worried. He was a barber, after all, and in his sixties. What could he know about the latest trends?

'*You* thought. Which one of us is the stylist here? I'll show you something.' He drew a comb through her hair to produce a straight right-sided parting, then combed it again to show a left-sided parting. 'As a matter of fact it would look wonderful with a left parting but then you'll say that's the boys' side, correct?'

Jessie nodded, her worry deepening.

'But you can see how the left suits you?'

She nodded again, half-heartedly.

'But you won't break the rules. What do you think, Sarah?' he said, taking the towel from her.

'For once in your life, you're right. Let him do what he wants, Jessie. You'll get the best cut and you'll start a a new rage. But I think you should have a fringe.'

'Why? Why should she be like everyone else? Look.' He combed Jessie's hair back and pushed it to the side. 'That doesn't suit her?'

'It'll fall across her eyes . . .'

'Do me a favour, woman, go away.' He flicked his fingers at her. 'Go cook the supper. You think I would give her a cut that would fall where it shouldn't? She's got good, thick, strong hair. It's a joy to work with. I've never come across natural blonde hair like this before, it's normally so fine you can't do a thing with it.'

'I suppose you could be right,' said Sarah, 'but then Jessie's got such a lovely face you couldn't go far wrong.'

'I never go anywhere wrong, thank you very much. Go away.'

Sarah threw up her hands and smiled at Jessie's reflection. 'He asks my advice, I give it, he takes no notice. Why ask in the first place?'

'I'm going to give her a fringe! I'm taking your advice! But it will be a long fringe, one she can brush away from her face, not one that sits there looking like a bloody pelmet!'

'Which is what I said in the first place!' she called, going back to the kitchen.

Maurice smiled at Jessie in the mirror. 'See what I mean? She wins whatever. Now then, I'm going to dampen it, then cut it, then wash it; finish off with the scissors, a little snip here and there, then almost dry it, and then use the curling tongs on the ends. What I would like you to do is put a smile on that face because you are going to walk out of here looking like a million dollars, a model out of one of those women's journals you young girls waste your money on.'

Jessie wasn't convinced but was relieved to be hidden away and in safe hands. 'Wake me up when it's over,' she said wryly.

'Tch. Anyone would think I was a surgeon.' He continued to talk while he dampened, combed and considered. Once he began to cut, not another word escaped his lips and Jessie kept her eyes closed throughout, too frightened to watch as her hair got shorter and shorter.

'OK, young lady,' he said at last, 'but before you examine this work of art, remember, it's still damp, it hasn't been washed or tonged.'

'I know,' she said. She opened her eyes and stared at the reflection of someone she hardly recognised. Her face broke into a broad smile, showing her lovely straight white teeth. It was a perfect cut and style, level with her chin. She gazed at her new self, speechless.

'Well?' There was laughter in the old man's voice.

'I love it. I love it, Maurice, you're a genius. A real genius.'

'I know.' He winked at her, pleased as punch. 'You wait until we've finished with you. Every head will turn as you walk along the street.' He called loudly to his wife, his face filled with pride. 'Sarah! Come and show Jessie to the bathroom, she can wash her own bloody hair.' Proud of his good deed, he went down to the barber shop.

Ten minutes later he was back. The last of his customers had gone and he had closed the shop. He put the finishing touches to Jessie's hair and then admired his work over a cup of tea with her and his wife. Thanking both him and Sarah, Jessie eventually got up to leave. As they took her through to the front of the shop, she asked for the fourth time if she could pay for the cut and style, but they wouldn't hear of it. 'I loved doing it,' said Maurice, 'and I owed your father a favour – he did one for me once. Besides, when they see you, maybe the ladies will be queuing up outside my door instead of the hairdressers'.'

'You steal my customers and I'll divorce you,' said Sarah in her droll way.

'Mum will love it and I expect Dolly'll be down first thing, sitting in one of those barber chairs. I wouldn't be surprised if the girls at work . . .' Her words trailed off as she followed Sarah and Maurice's gaze. They were staring at their shop window, their faces twisted with torment. Painted across their window, in large white letters, were just two words: JEWS! YIDS!

Sickened by it, Jessie felt ashamed. There was nothing she

could say or do to help. She left them to scrub away the abuse themselves, which is what they wanted. Each of them had been living in the East End since they were very small children, immigrants from Poland, and each of them, like a thousand or so others, considered England to be their home.

Jessie was scared to think what might follow now their shop had been marked. Her thoughts turned to Alfie and she prayed that he would be at home when she got there, that he had had nothing to do with it.

'Blimey!' Alfie was the first to react when Jessie walked in with her new hairstyle. 'You look like someone else, Jess!'

Jessie had never been so pleased to see him. He obviously hadn't just come in, he looked as if he'd been there, reading his comics, since when she went out.

'Oh. Thanks very much, Jessie!' said Dolly. 'I was gonna get mine done like that next week. Now everyone'll say I've copied you. Well, they can say it. I'm still getting mine cut in that style.' She went back to her paperback.

Stephen said nothing. He just sat there gazing at Jessie, wide-eyed.

'Do you like it, Mum?'

'I do, Jessie, I do like it . . . but it's a bit of a shock. Whatever made you decide to do it?'

'I don't know. You'll never guess who cut it.'

Rose stood up and circled her. 'It's a very good cut. Wherever did you go? Not up to the West End, I hope. That would have cost a week's pay.'

'No, Mum, not up to the West End. Down the road, to Maurie Simons.'

'Maurie Simons? The barber? You went to a men's barber shop? Well, I never did, what a dark horse that man is. I hope you thanked him, Jessie.'

'Of course I thanked him.' Jessie didn't mention what had happened afterwards because her mother was smiling for a change.

'You wanted to make yourself look nice for this new boyfriend, I suppose. The one Sally brought round here. Tom, wasn't it? The one you told Dad about a while ago.'

'Yeah, Tom,' she said, with stars in her eyes. 'Tom Smith.'

'It's a bit soon after Max,' Rose said cautiously. How on earth was she going to keep Jessie from meeting Hannah if Tom really was the new love of Jessie's life? 'Be careful, Jessie. People do strange things on the rebound.'

Jessie didn't want to get into an argument but she did want her mum to accept Tom. 'It's not on the rebound,' she said, calmly but firmly. 'To tell you the truth, I was smitten by him right from the beginning.'

'Out of the frying pan and into the fire, if you ask me,' said Dolly, green with envy, having seen Tom on her way home from shopping for a new pair of shoes. 'Still, we can't tell you anything, Jessie, can we? You always know best. So where does he live then, this Tom?'

'Mind your own business,' said Jessie lightly. 'I don't want you pinching him off me, do I?' The truth was, Jessie had no idea where he lived and didn't think her mother would be too pleased about that. Little did she know that her mother could have told her where he lived.

Rose kept her knowledge to herself. She would have to warn Emmie to keep quiet too. Rose sighed. She was beginning to see that creating new secrets as well as keeping old ones was dangerous.

Chapter Eight

'That was a lovely dinner, Emmie girl, smashing,' said Charlie, giving his wife one of his special winks. The old saying was certainly true where he was concerned – the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

'I'm off out.' Johnnie, their eldest, looked across the dinner table at Tom. 'Fancy a pint?'

'Might do. I've just got to pop round and see Jessie first. Where you drinking?'

'Blind Beggar, but I won't bother to look out for you. If you're meeting this incredible Jessie of yours, we won't be seeing you.'

'Yes you will. I won't be there more than half an hour so if you go on from the pub, don't forget to leave a message behind the bar.'

'Will do. Don't wait up, Mum.'

Emmie snorted. 'As if I would. Keep your voice down and take your shoes off when you get in. Some of us need eight hours' sleep.'

'I'll tiptoe, promise.' Johnnie turned back to Tom. 'Why don't you bring Jessie along? You've been courting the girl for a good while now. Time we had a look at the goods.'

'All in good time, Johnnie boy, all in good time. She's the right one so you'll be seeing plenty of her in the future.' Tom grinned.

'Oh yeah. Like all the others that got the elbow – or gave you the boot. Do you know what I reckon, Dad?' said Johnnie, in a baiting mood.

'Go on, what?' Charlie liked joining in his sons' banter.

'I reckon he's frightened that me or Stanley'll pinch this one from him, so she must be a looker, eh?'

Laughing, Charlie waved him off. 'Tormenting fucker,' he said. 'Go on out. Pity Tom don't take a leaf out of your book, son. Don't love 'em – just leave 'em.'

'Too right, Dad, too bleeding right,' said Johnnie, laughing. 'I've got a million to make before I settle down. Ain't that right, Mum?'

'That's right, son, yeah. A million for you and a million for me and one for the pot.'

'You wait and see. I'm the only one in this room with a bank account, so what does that tell you?'

'That you're tight,' said Charlie, 'and stashing it all away. Come the war and you'll be lucky to see any of it. They'll bomb your bank first off. Spend it while you can, son, preferably on me.'

Tom looked thoughtful. 'So the football coupons are working out then?'

'Yep. I told you it would work, but oh no, you didn't wanna come in with me. I've got a few hundred in the bank which is better than being a hundred in debt, which is what I was eighteen months ago. But the bank manager had faith; yep, a stranger had faith in me. What with that little sideline and my regular job with all that lovely overtime—'

'Oh, sod off out,' said Charlie, used to his son going on about money. 'Just don't give up your proper job, that's all. At least that's reliable money.'

'I won't, Dad, don't you worry. If there's an hour to work, I'll work it. See you.' With that, Johnnie was gone.

'Mind you, he has got a point,' said Charlie, leaning back and looking at Tom. 'Money grows more money. What's with

the black shirt then? New fashion, is it, or did your pet flea die?'

'Go to bed, Charlie,' said Emmie, 'or you'll be in a right mood first thing and blaming us for keeping you up.'

Standing up, Charlie made a business of having a good stretch. 'I was up at half past three this morning. Blooming fruit comes in from the farms earlier and earlier. Blackberries tomorrow, Em. That should please you, eh?'

Once Emmie and Tom were alone, she nodded at Tom's shirt and said, 'I hope you're not wearing that for the reason I think you're wearing it.'

'I'm going to the club, Mum, and that's all there is to it.'

'So you're not seeing Jessie then?'

'Yes I am. Before I meet up with Johnnie for a pint.'

'You're a bloody fool, getting involved with that lot. I knew this was coming. You've been thinking about joining for a long time, I know. Getting a hiding was just the excuse you'd been waiting for.'

Tom gave up the pretence. 'Dead right. I've been thinking about it long enough, now I'm doing it. They're not *all* bully boys. It's just a handful of spivs that 'ave wormed their way in, a small faction, not interested in politics. You'll always get that. We can wipe them out.'

'I won't be able to look some of my neighbours in the face if it gets out. You needn't have bought that shirt, they don't all walk around like that.'

'Course they don't. This style of shirt, in black, is all the rage. Besides, I never bought it, Johhnie gave it to me. Stop worrying. We're not all thugs. You'll be surprised to know that a lot of police officers are Blackshirts on the quiet. A hell of a lot.'

'Never! As if they'd have anything to do with it.' Emmie [illegible] to consider it.

'It's got nothing to do with law and order, that's the point. It's politics.'

'Tell that to Hitler.'

'We're not talking about Hitler. We're not copying Germany or Italy. We just want what's best for our country. If things go on the way they are, by the time we reach the end of this century, England'll be bursting at the seams. There won't be enough houses or jobs for a quarter of the population by then unless it's controlled now. If we don't make noises now, Europe'll suck us in and you can forget what England stood for. What Britain stands for.'

'Yeah, and if we're daft enough to be taken in by Mosley, Hitler'll suck us in,' said Emmie.

'Forget Hitler', Tom said firmly. 'We'll blow him to bits in the next war – with Mosley leading the way.'

'I think you're getting your facts a bit mixed up, son. The papers say that Mosley doesn't want another war against Germany.'

'Maybe not but that's not to say he'll sit back if we're a target. I told you, he's for England, and we'll fight to keep this country the way it is, war or no war.'

'Well, it's all a bit much for me to fathom. How you know so much about it beats me. I think you've been a bit of a dark horse on the quiet. I shouldn't let your brothers hear you talk like this.'

'You'd be surprised. Ask Johnnie what he thinks about it. He's the clever one, after all, the one who's gonna be top dog living in a bloody mansion.'

'Johnnie? What's he got to do with this?'

'Take a look in his trunk. I did. He's never pushed his views but when I found out, 'cos I was nosy, he explained one or two things to me. You don't really think he's gonna spend the evening in a pub, do you? Johnnie? He's as tight as a bank manager. There's no bar in the social club that we're going to. Cups of tea only. Free cups of tea.' Smiling, Tom picked up his tobacco tin and left.

As Tom's words sunk in, Emmie could see how it all fitted. Johnnie had always been the secretive one, never too open about

his comings and goings. She had to face the fact that she'd been living in a world of her own. She wondered about her other son Stanley. But Stanley was only just sixteen, and mad on girls and dancing. He wouldn't waste his time on such things. Not Stanley.

Blackshirts. Two of her sons were Blackshirts. She should have felt angry, or at the least very disappointed with the pair of them, but she didn't. Loath though she was to admit it, secretly Emmie felt quite proud of her boys, of their patriotism, and she imagined that Tom was probably right, it was only a handful who were anti-Semitic and uninterested in politics. She wondered about her husband, Charlie. Did he know what Johnnie and Tom had got themselves into?

When she had cleared the kitchen, Emmie went into the best room and put up her feet. Her sons were old enough to know what they were doing and by the sound of it Tom wasn't joining the Blackshirts because he wanted to see the Jews leave this country but because he didn't want to see millions more foreigners coming in. No doubt Johnnie was of the same mind. She couldn't argue with that, not really.

She picked up her knitting. She was making a pullover for Charlie's next birthday; it was a very tricky Fair Isle pattern with six colours, no easy task. When the door knocker sounded she cursed. She wasn't expecting anyone and all the men were out except for Charlie, who was in bed, snoring.

She was more than surprised to see Rose on her doorstep. 'Hello, Emmie. I'm taking a bit of your advice and getting out while the evenings are still nice. So I thought I'd pop round for a visit. I'm not disturbing you, am I?'

Emmie thought that her friend's little speech had been rehearsed and her heart went out to her. Rose was probably feeling the loneliness of widowhood. 'Course you're not disturbing me. It's lovely to see you. Charlie's in bed and the boys are out so I'm by myself.'

Rose didn't stop talking as she followed Emmie into the

living room, which was unusual for her. Emmie was only half listening at first, her mind on her knitting which she would have to put away, but not before marking which row and colour she was on. When Rose mentioned Ingrid, Emmie drew breath.

'I couldn't believe my ears, Emmie, when my mother mentioned your name ...'

'Sit down, Rose, and I'll pour us both a drop of sherry. I've still got some left over from Christmas.'

'When my mother said you had been seeing her all these years, I was shocked. You never said a word about it, I felt as if I'd had my head in sand all this time.'

'I know what you mean, Rose, I've had my fair share of such feelings of late. Not very nice, I grant you.'

'Why didn't you write and tell me you'd seen her, Emmie? Why did you let me believe that my mother was dead? You'll never know the shock I had when she arrived out of the blue.'

'For a start, Rose, I was sworn to secrecy – once again. Secondly, you never believed she was dead and you know that's the truth. You might have thought she'd gone back to Germany, and I could see nothing wrong with you believing that. Had you ever shown the slightest interest in your mother, I would 'ave been in like a shot. To tell you the truth, I'm glad it's all come out.' Emmie handed Rose a glass of sherry and drank hers down in one before refilling her glass.

'She said you'd met up in Wickham's,' Rose murmured.

'That's right.' Emmie sank into her old feather-cushioned armchair. 'She came in after a hat – way back, when I was working in millinery. It was lovely to see her again. She asked me to not mention it. She spotted you once, you know, along Whitechapel, but ducked into a side street.'

'How could she recognise me after all this time, Emmie? That really is too much to believe.' Rose shook her head.

'I showed her photographs of us taken after the war,' Emmie admitted.

Rose laughed bitterly. 'Well, well. Whatever will you tell

me next? My mother knows all there is to know about me and my family while I knew nothing about her life.'

'No, and whose fault's that? Besides, there was nothing much to tell. Ingrid wanted to know how you'd fared and I told her. She invited me over to her little basement flat for coffee and I went. I love Victoria Park, you know I do. You remember us, years ago, on the boating lake? We used to shriek with laughter.'

Rose nodded. 'Of course I remember it. They were happier times.'

'Anyway, once we'd met again we kept it up, seeing each other every month or so and that way she got to hear about Hannah. I shouldn't have told her about the twins but I did, and only because she asked and I was trying to get her to go and see you. I do believe she's blamed herself all these years. In fact, I know she has. She thought that because she'd given you away, you'd done the same – history repeating itself. Silly woman. I thought it was a load of bunkum but I never said so. It wasn't my place to pass judgement, one way or the other.' Emmie looked at her friend. 'So there you have it, Rose. No more, no less. I bumped into an old family friend one day and we kept in touch.'

'But there's something else I've got to worry about isn't there?' Rose pointed out. 'Jessie and Tom. I did think you were going to have a word with your son. I would have come round sooner to broach you on the subject but I thought it had fizzled out. It seems to be going from strength to strength now.'

Emmie held up a hand. 'I did have a word when you first asked me to, Rose. And he listened. In fact, he stood Jessie up on that first date, you may remember. But once she split up with that Max feller, there was no stopping Tom – or Jessie, if you ask me.' She paused and then went on, 'And I'm afraid the girls have met up too, which was no fault of Tom's. He was out walking with Hannah and they bumped into Jessie. Apparently the girls got on like a house on fire – which is to be expected,

in my opinion. It happened some time ago.' Emmie's expression was sympathetic as she looked at her friend's stricken face. 'I did think about coming to see you about it, but what was the point? They'd met, and that was that. I do believe they've become friends. I believe it might be for the best.'

Rose's knuckles were white. 'Have they now? Well, things seem to be going from bad to worse, Emmie, and your son, Tom, always at the centre of it.'

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Rose.'

'Knowing how delicate the situation is, I would have thought he'd have kept away. There are plenty more fish in the sea for the young men round these parts.'

With a smile on her face, Emmie leaned forward and patted her friend's hand. 'It's about time, Rose Warner. You've been bottling your anger for too long. Maybe you should go straight round to see Gerta now – while you're fired up?'

'I had every intention of doing so . . . but I came here instead. I can't face the woman, Emmie. I've news over the compensation claim but if I go round there – I might just slap her face. That face. I can still see her expression at the funeral even after all these months. She was gloating, I'm sure of it.'

'Well then, write to her instead. I take it you've something to tell her that she'll be pleased about?'

'Yes and no. Hannah will have a fair share but it's to go in a trust where Gerta won't be able to get her hands on the funds. It will go to Hannah when she's twenty-one, which is when I shall see her and when she'll learn the truth.'

Resting back in her armchair, Emmie was pleased. 'You've done well, Rose. That's the best news I've heard in a long time.'

'I've an excellent solicitor, I will say that. But yes, I have had to think on my feet over this. I dare say Hannah could do with the money.'

'Dead right. She's still looking for a flat but I'm afraid they don't come cheap. She doesn't earn that much at the

library. It would be lovely if she didn't have to wait that long—'

Rose raised a hand. 'Enough said, Emmie. She'll *have* to wait. Of course if Gerta gets nasty over it, then things will be forced out into the open before then. I pray to God that isn't the case. I'm in no fit state to fight her or to face Jessie or Hannah should it all come out sooner than I would like. Now let's leave it there, shall we?' There was a no-nonsense tone in her voice.

Rubbing her eyes, Emmie yawned. 'Whatever you say, Rose. Whatever you say.'

'And you will have a word with Tom? I feel certain that if he were to stay away from Jessie, she and Max would get back together again, which would simplify things.'

Ignoring that, Emmie turned the conversation to Ingrid. 'I'm pleased you and your mother have got together at last. It's a pity it's taken so long. Too many wasted years, eh?'

Rose knew exactly what her friend was implying. 'Oh, I don't know so much. What you don't have you don't miss.'

'If you say so, Rose,' smiled Emmie, 'if you say so . . .'

When Rose arrived home, she went into the kitchen where she found Jessie by herself, drinking a glass of freshly pressed lemon and water.

'I can hear those boys aren't asleep yet. I don't know where they get their energy from,' said Rose, taking off her light blue straw hat. 'I suppose Dolly's out dancing again.'

'No. But she's getting ready to go out,' said Jessie.

'Is she now?' Rose glanced at the clock. 'Not at this hour she's not. It's gone nine. I'll have to have a word with her. She goes too far.'

Jessie was only half listening. She was feeling nauseous. She prayed the lemon drink would make it pass before Rose noticed. Jessie's worst fear had been realised; she was pregnant. Pregnant with Tom's baby. She hadn't told him yet; she hadn't had the courage. He seemed preoccupied lately. Jessie had a strong

feeling that he had joined the Blackshirts but she couldn't think about that, she had far more important things to worry about.

The lemon drink wasn't working. Rose was going on about Dolly. Her voice sounded distorted to Jessie, as if it was coming from miles away. She recognised the sensation; it was similar to when she had passed out at work, the day after the accident at the docks. She wrapped her arms round herself. *Not now, Jessie, not now!*

'What's the matter, Jess?' said Rose suddenly. 'You've gone a terrible colour.' She placed an arm round her daughter and studied her pale face. 'What is it? Are you in pain?'

'Stars . . .' murmured Jessie weakly. She heard Rose call her name and the next thing she knew she was on the floor, her head between her knees, being propped up by Dolly.

'The . . . floor . . . hit . . . me . . . in . . . the . . . face.' She barely managed to get the words out. 'It came up . . . and hit me in the face.' Rose told her to save her strength, not to say another word, as she patted Jessie's sweat-beaded face with a wet sponge.

'She's as white as a ghost, Mum,' murmured Dolly. 'Should I run for the doctor?'

'I'm all right, Dolly,' said Jessie, recovering. 'I drank some milk earlier, the remains of the bottle, and I think it had curdled.'

Rose stroked away damp strands of hair from Jessie's face. 'Help me get your sister upstairs and into her bed, Dolly. It won't hurt you to stay with her and have an early night, you've been clocking in at work late far too many times recently.'

'I'm all right, Mum,' said Jessie, taking deep breaths of air. 'Honestly, I can manage. Let Dolly go out.' Her legs felt like jelly, but if she had to she would drag herself up those stairs.

'I'd rather not be clocking in at all,' Dolly said, helping Rose ease her sister up from the floor. 'The rest room reeks of old ashtrays.'

'Well, that's your own fault. If you'd stuck it out at the handbag factory until they put you on satin evening bags, which

you would have loved, you wouldn't be working at the toy factory, would you? You would have been very good at sewing the satin handbags and it's good wages, piecework.'

'I'm leaving the factory soon anyway.' Dolly put her weight under Jessie's arm as they helped her up the stairs. 'I might apply for a position at the Bethnal Green Museum if it's not too boring.'

'Work is work, young lady, not a daily outing to find amusement.'

Once Jessie was in her bed, Rose folded and tucked in the sheet and then felt Jessie's forehead for a temperature, and stroked her hair, telling her she would be fine by the morning. Jessie felt as if she was a small child again, being watched over and cared for.

'I'll come up later to see how you are, Jessie,' said Rose. 'Try and get some sleep.'

Try and get some sleep? It was a job trying to stay awake. She heard the bedroom door close behind Rose and Dolly before she drifted into sleep. Tom appeared in her dreams; he was standing tall, smart and handsome at the altar, waiting for her. She was wearing a beautiful trailing satin dress and long veil, with Dolly and Sally as her bridesmaids, dressed in blue. Everyone was smiling as she walked along the aisle, holding her dad's arm. Her grandfather was there too. Happy and smiling, gliding along to the sound of the organ, Jessie glanced at Rose in the front row. There was a look of horror on her face; she was staring at her daughter's stomach, which was growing by the second, bigger and bigger, and she was screaming, telling everyone to keep away from her.

'Jess!. Wake up! *Jessie!*'

'It's all right, Dolly,' Jessie murmured, half asleep. 'It was only a nightmare. Where's your bouquet?' Then she sank into a deep sleep.

The following weeks weren't easy for Jessie as she tried to hide

her condition, but at least their lavatory was outside in the back garden, away from everyone. She could be sick without being heard. She still hadn't told Tom she was pregnant. She was afraid that the burden and responsibility of a baby would be too much for his free spirit. She couldn't face seeing his reaction, not yet.

Her mother would be furious, of that she had no doubt, furious and ashamed. And then there was the rest of the family, her aunts and uncles and, worst of all, Grandmother Blake. Jessie pictured her on hearing the news, a telling look on her face and that knowing smile. The neighbours would talk, and Emmie, Tom's mother, would likely think her a tramp. She and Tom had, after all, only been courting for a few months.

She had tried telling Sally on one occasion, leading up to break the news by saying that she couldn't describe the love she felt for Tom, but Sally had been in one of her frivolous moods and had ruined it by laughing at her. 'One word'll cover it, Jess. Fancy. You fancy Tom and he fancies you,' she said, 'just like me and Ron.'

So Jessie had decided to keep the secret to herself for as long as possible. Once it was out in the open, everyone would start making plans, plans that hundreds of other women who had conceived out of wedlock had made, and she didn't want that yet. She had feigned a period and would go on doing so until she could no longer hide her secret. She was eating good nutritious food but no bread or sweet pudding. She had just eaten an egg salad for lunch. She had to be healthy for the baby but she couldn't afford to put on weight too fast.

'You need fat on your bones, Jessie,' said Rose, before leaving the house to go shopping. 'It's bad enough when people are ill and lose weight through no fault of their own, without you going on a diet for the sake of vanity.' With that, she picked up her shopping bag and left the house.

Jessie asked Dolly why she hadn't gone into the factory that day. She usually worked Saturdays.

Ignoring the question, Dolly kept her back to Jessie – she was washing a blouse in the butler sink. 'You wouldn't think it, would you,' she said, 'but back in Saxon times they ate really well, beef, mutton, chicken and goose, and they ate oysters like they was peanuts. There's a girl who works in the office at the factory who's as skinny as a rake, all she ever eats is—'

'I'm not on a diet for my looks!' Jessie cut in. 'I'm just trying to stay healthy, that's all. One of the girls at work has studied nutrition and she says that we eat far too much fat – butter, lard and cheese. And it's not good for the heart . . . or the blood.'

Dolly found this amusing. 'See if you say that when it's Sunday with roast beef and batter pudding for dinner, with apple pie and custard for afters.'

'You shouldn't just take a day off when you fancy,' Jessie continued, determined to get her sister's mind off food. 'You'll get the sack if—'

'I'm gonna give it up.' She gripped the sodden blouse with both hands and twisted it until she had squeezed most of the water out before she put it through the mangle. 'There's no jobs at the Bethnal Green Museum for the likes of me so I might try for a job in one of them Marks and Spencer branches that 'ave opened up.'

'You go from one job to another and if you're—'

'So?' interrupted Dolly sharply. 'What's wrong with that? Better than sticking in one boring job for nearly three years. I don't know how you can bear it, no wonder Max dumped you. Three years with having to listen to you go on about the same old people at work.'

'Max didn't dump me. Anyway, I've got Tom now and I wouldn't have him if I was still with Max.'

'Probably not, knowing you. Can't have two boyfriends – oh no! You're so bloody prim and proper. You want to break out of it.' Dolly twisted the mangle forcefully.

Jessie couldn't help smiling. Prim and proper. She was hardly that. If only she could have told Dolly there and then that she was

pregnant, it would have given her the shock of her life. 'So why're you thinking of leaving? I thought you didn't mind the work?'

'It's all right,' said Dolly, 'but the women are boring, except for Cook in the canteen. I love Cook, she looks after me, piles up my plate when no one's looking. I sneak off the factory floor sometimes and go and give her a hand. She has to make up the fire in the snug where Management have their coffee, bloody cheek. They take right liberties there.'

Jessie was surprised at the way Dolly was opening up. She hardly ever talked about work, only boys. 'She'll miss you if you leave then, won't she?'

Dolly threw her blouse over the airing rack and scowled. 'That bossy cow ...'

'Who?'

'The secretary. The chairman's secretary. I was stoking the fire yesterday afternoon to give Cook a five-minute sit-down and I was making the flames burn just right when she came in and shouted at me, asked what I was doing in there and not at my work bench. Smug cow. It's all her fault.'

'*What* is?' asked Jessie. Dolly seemed close to tears. 'What happened?'

'I laid the poker down for a second to try and make up an excuse why I was in there, one flipping second ... She saw the smoke and smelt the singeing before I did.'

'It burnt the carpet?'

'Course it did. I was looking at her! Trying to look sorry while she barked at me. She saw the smoke and that was that, said it would cost me my job and it did, she saw to that. I wasn't even rude to 'er and only called her a bleeding cow once I knew I was out.'

'There'll be other jobs, other nice people to work with,' Jessie said sympathetically.

'I'm not bothered. I might learn shorthand and typing, keep Mum happy. Sitting in a warm comfortable office all day doing bugger all can't be bad.'

'Don't you believe it. I'll never forget when I first started work in that typing pool at the London Electric. The manageress used to walk up and down the aisles, keeping an eye on every one of us girls as we sat there typing. She made sure we were typing all the time. We weren't allowed to talk except at tea break, in the canteen. Fifteen minutes we got, and it took half that time to get there and back. By the time we got our cup of tea we had to swallow it down. You wouldn't put up with something like that, Dolly.'

'At least you've got a career. You could get a job anywhere now, in any office. Whereas I can only work in a factory, below stairs or in a tea shop. What kind of a career's that?'

Jess was surprised by Dolly's change of attitude; up until now she'd been adamant that she would never work in a stuffy office. 'A career's not everything,' she said. 'You'll be married by the time you're twenty, I bet. Married with babies. You're pretty enough.'

'I might even go abroad to find work,' said Dolly dreamily. 'America. Don't imagine that all I want is the butler sink and boiler. If that sort of life's not for you why should it be the life for me?'

'Maybe it is for me. A little one up, one down . . . a small fire burning . . . dinner in the oven for when my man comes home . . .' It was Jessie's turn to sound dreamy now.

'Oh yeah? And what's come over you? What's changed *your* mind? The handsome Tom? He's done this to you, has he? Made you go all soppy?'

'Maybe. It was different with Max. I did sort of think about a future with him, but it was Max who brought up the subject of marriage – and Moira who smashed it down.' She smiled to herself, pleased now that Moira had stepped in. 'I'd marry Tom tomorrow if he asked me.'

'What're his brothers like?'

'I haven't met them yet. Why?' Jessie knew why she was asking. She was hoping there might be another at home like

Tom. Dolly always opened the door when she knew Tom was coming round and would chat to him while Jessie collected her things.

'Just wondered,' said Dolly. 'So, you haven't been invited round his house and Mum's not asked you to fetch Tom in yet even though you've been courting for months now. Max was in for a cup of tea on your first date.'

Dolly had touched a raw spot. It was true, Rose hadn't shown any interest in meeting Tom and whenever Jessie mentioned him she went quiet.

'Don't forget that Max's parents own the shop next door to ours,' Jessie said. 'Mum already knew Max. She's known the family for years.'

'What about Tom's then? I bet you don't even know what his address is.'

'Of course I do.'

'Well then, why don't we pop round there and see them? It's Saturday and I'm skint. I can't go out shopping, not even for a new lipstick. We could go for a stroll, pop in to see Tom.'

'I suppose we could.' Jessie cleared the table of cups and saucers. 'It's a lovely day. The boys won't be back from the boxing club for a few hours yet.'

'Our Stephen,' laughed Dolly, 'in a boxing ring, all white and skinny with gloves bigger than his own 'ead.'

'Don't be daft, Stephen never goes into the ring. He likes to watch Alfie winning his rounds. It's better than sitting at home doing nothing.' Jessie examined her face and hair in the mirror. Since she'd had her hair cut, it always looked good, even if she said so herself. Tom had been strange about it at first, sulking because he liked long hair, but he soon came round, admitting in the end that her chic new style suited her face. Lovely was the word he used, eventually.

'Come on then,' she said. 'I'll just put a bit of lipstick on and we'll go round there, see if we can fix you up with his brother Stanley.'

'Right,' said Dolly. 'I'll go and make myself look my best then – mustn't let the side down.'

Walking down the street arm in arm, talking and laughing, Jessie realised that she and Dolly hadn't been out together like this since they were very young.

'Mum seems a lot better since Granny German came onto the scene and they see more of each other,' said Dolly, 'and you're a lot different since Tom came along. It's funny how everyone seems to have changed.'

'So you think I did the right thing, then?'

'You know you did the right thing. Max was all right but Tom's a cracker and more like us, in a manner of speaking.'

'I think Mum would have preferred me to stay with Max.'

'She'll come round, Granny German'll soon pull her up. She's all right, I like 'er. I'm glad you went and found her, Jess,' Dolly said earnestly.

'What's come over you? You didn't care tuppence before. Or was that an act?'

'Course it was an act, I'm not made of stone, you know. I felt really sorry for Mum when she told me about it and I was sad but I'm not like you, I don't dwell on morbid things. You take life too seriously.'

What a dark horse she was turning out to be, thought Jessie. She'd kept her true feelings hidden all this time. 'We're nearly there,' she said. 'Don't get all huffy if we're not invited in or I'll die of shame.'

'Tch. Of course I won't. I've got manners. I just pick and choose when to use them, that's all.'

'Well, bite your tongue if your temper gets up.'

'Temper? What temper?' said Dolly with mock innocence. 'I'll be as quiet as a mouse. What number is it?'

'Eighteen.'

'Not far then.' Dolly stopped and looked around her. 'This is nicer than I thought it would be. A few trees as well. I thought the back streets of Bethnal Green were a dump and

full of rubbish. This ain't bad, nice little corner shop ... no horse dung in the road ...'

At that moment a horse-drawn cart turned the corner. It was the fruit and veg man. The red-faced vendor tipped his cap to them as he passed and then turned into another street, leaving a pile of steaming horse manure in his wake.

Laughing, they linked arms again and walked on towards Tom's house. 'Bethnal Green's changed,' said Dolly. 'I was thinking of the old days instead of now. The Jago, near Shoreditch. That *was* the pits at one time, right up until the turn of the century. Fights went on there day and night and the women drank neat gin. Did you know that before Queen Victoria had—'

Jessie quickly cut her off before she could get into her stride. 'Dolly, please, not now. Tell me later. We're here.'

Outside Tom's front door, Jessie suddenly felt unsure of herself. Had Tom wanted her to see where he lived, he would have taken her back there by now. 'I've changed my mind, Dolly, let's go home.'

'Not likely!' Dolly pulled herself away and knocked three times before Jessie could stop her.

It was Emmie who answered the door. 'Is Tom in?' said Dolly, as bold as brass.

'He is.' Instead of a welcoming smile, there was concern on Emmie's face.

'We were just passing,' said Jessie, 'so ...'

'Ah.' Emmie had to think fast, Hannah was inside. 'Well, you'd best come in, the pair of you. I'll give him a shout.'

Dolly was the first in, eager and smiling. 'I've come to see if your other son, Stanley, is as handsome as your Tom.'

'Dolly!' hissed Jessie. She could kill her sister at times.

'Well, you're out of luck, madam, Stanley's at work, although he should be home soon. But that's not to say he won't be out again in a flash after filling his belly and having a quick spruce. You can wait in the front room and I'll—'

Laughter drifted into the passage, a girl's laughter, merging with Tom's. It was Hannah.

'Jessie! I can't believe you've called in at this very moment! I was just thinking about you. Tell her, Tom. Tell Jessie what I just said.' Hannah and Tom came out and joined them in the passage.

'Word for word?' asked Tom, sighing and slightly embarrassed by Jessie's unexpected appearance in his home.

'Word for word.' Hannah's eyes were sparkling.

'She said, "I've just had a vision of Jessie looking in at the window as if this was a baker's shop and she was choosing which cakes to buy."'

'It's true! I really did see it, and you were wearing *that* frock!'

'I wore it when I saw you in the hospital,' said Jessie, 'so you were bound to think of me in it.' She felt jealous that Hannah was here.

'But you must have lots of dresses, yet I imagined you in that one. Were you thinking about cakes, Jessie?' There was hope in her voice.

'Well, I wasn't thinking about this being a bakery or choosing cakes, but I thought I could smell a cake baking and it made me think of buns, which made me feel hungry.' Her jealousy disappeared as fast as it had come.

'You see! Thought transference.' It went very quiet as Emmie and Tom glanced at each other.

Hannah turned to Dolly, enjoying herself. 'I'd say that you are Jessie's younger sister. Now tell me I'm wrong. I bet I'm not.'

'You're right,' said Dolly dispassionately, 'we're sisters. We don't look much like each other though, so you *must* be a witch. Jessie looks more like you than she does me as—'

'I'll have no talk of witches, if you don't mind!' snapped Emmie, cutting her short. Collecting herself, she turned to Jessie. 'How are you, Jessie and how's your mother?'

'She's fine, thank you. We were just passing and—'

'You thought this was a railway station? Because that's what it looks like, everyone standing around waiting for the next train. If you'll all go into the front room I'll fetch a pot of tea and some buns, hot from the oven.' She turned to Tom. 'The cat might 'ave got your tongue but I'll have your hands. Come and take them buns out for me, my theumatism's playing up.'

Following Hannah into the front room, Dolly said, 'Are you family then?'

'No. I'm Hannah. Tom's friend.' They all sat down.

'Oh? What's his brother like? Stanley? Only his mum's trying to fix us up.'

'What she means, Hannah,' said Jessie, 'is that she's hoping Emmie will fix them up. You have to take everything Dolly says with a pinch of salt.'

'Are *you* courting, Hannah?' asked Dolly, unfazed.

'No . . .' Hannah turned her face away. 'Actually, I've never been on a date. I have been asked but never had the courage to go. My mother always said that boys ask you out for one thing only. I've heard her say that so many times that I think I believe it.'

'So you should,' said Dolly, 'it's true. Let 'em kiss you goodnight and their hands are up your jumper or inside your blouse and in your knickers if you're not quick enough to stop 'em. Dirty sods. Are you a foreigner?'

'No. My mother's German but I was born in this country. My father's British born and bred.'

'I thought as much. Being German's all right, your lot were in the East End much earlier than most people like to think. After the collapse of Roman rule, German tribesmen took over the East End – I bet you didn't know that. *Stibba* people came to Stepney, *Bleda* to Bethnal Green and *Weappa* to Wapping. The country was re-Christianised and a small wooden church appeared in *Stibba*, that's when the church began its six-hundred-year rule in East London,' Dolly finished proudly.

'That's very interesting, Dolly.' Hannah went very quiet and then said, 'I didn't think I had an accent . . .'

'I never said you did. It's the *way* you talk. You can always tell.'

'Tom'll be in soon,' said Emmie, coming into the room. 'He's just having a quick shave and change of clothes. You took him by surprise, turning up like this, Jessie. Took us all by surprise.' She placed the tray on a small side table and told the girls to help themselves. Dolly was in like a shot.

'How many sugars, Jessie?' asked Hannah.

'Give her six to fatten her up a bit, she's too skinny.'

'Just *one*, thanks, Hannah.' Jessie scowled at Dolly. She wanted her support right now, not torment. Jessie was beginning to feel she'd done the wrong thing, barging in on Tom's family like this.

'Well, I'll leave you to it, girls,' said Emmie. She was worried her tense expression would give things away. 'I've work to do in the kitchen. Give my regards to your mother, Jessie.'

'How come you know Mum?' asked Dolly.

'She doesn't, Dolly. We were in the papers, don't forget. Most people around her know about Dad's accident. Isn't that right, Emmie?'

'Yes, that's right.' She sniffed the air. 'Ah, here he comes, his Brylcreem goes before 'im.' Sure enough, Tom came in a moment later, going straight to the tea table.

'It's funny you should come round, Jess, I was gonna pop round to you earlier than I said, as it happens. There's a meeting at my club that I can't miss.' He poured himself a cup of tea. 'If I do come round, I can only see you for an hour or so. Is that all right?'

'An hour? But it's Saturday night, Tom.' Jessie tried to hide her disappointment.

'I know. Can't be helped.' He sipped his tea and winked at her. 'I'll make it up to you tomorrow. We'll spend the day over

Victoria Park and I'll take you on a boat. I'll even let Mum make us a picnic up.'

'Sounds lovely to me,' said Dolly, stretching and showing her legs and leaning back in the armchair as if she was at home. 'What club is it?' she asked, thinking she might go and keep Tom company.

'Trade union. Stuff and nonsense but there you are. It's all to the good.'

'Speaking of which,' said Hannah, 'I'd best be going. I'll see you there, Tom. Try not to be late.'

'Oh, so you're going as well, are you, Hannah?' said Dolly.

'Yes. I help the secretary – take notes of the meeting, that kind of thing.' Hannah was covering up for Tom and Jessie sensed it, but she would say nothing, she could rely on Dolly to ask the questions.

'Are there many girls there then?'

'Not too many,' Hannah told her.

'So it's mostly men?'

'You could say that.'

'I wouldn't mind joining a club like that,' said Dolly, thinking about all the lads who might be there.

'You have to be a member of the union,' said Tom. 'The Workers' Union.'

'Oh, that lets me out then. You must be popular, Hannah. Not much female competition.'

'Does that pot want refilling yet?' Emmie was back in the doorway, being mother.

'No more for me, thank you,' said Jessie, ready to leave. She wanted to go home, to have a chance to think things over. She did trust Tom, but she could tell he was lying about where he and Hannah were going, and she didn't like it.

'Are you a member of the trade union as well, Mrs Smith?' joked Dolly.

'Trade union? Ha, not likely.' She turned to Tom. 'Have you glanced at today's paper yet, Tom? Unemployment's set to

rise again. The docks'll be the first to be hit, you won't find so much work down there if this goes on. That's why I think you should be casting your nets for back-up wages instead of wasting time on *union meetings*.' Emmie didn't believe his story about where he was going any more than Jessie did.

Emmie sat down and looked from Tom to Jessie. 'I've come up with an idea. A bloody marvellous idea. But to see it through we'll need a bit of capital. Property investment. It's just the right time to buy and rent out, I reckon. The houses round this way will never be as cheap as they are now.'

Tom looked astonished. 'You want to buy this house, Mother? Whatever for? I know the rent went up but—'

'Not this one, no, but the rent rise is exactly the point. I'm talking about four terraced houses, the two up, two downs in Grant Street. I got the word today and I think we should move ourselves, get in quick. The landlord, like a lot of other people, believes there'll be a war and if there is, this part of London'll be hit. Well, let 'em think that way, let 'em sell up cheap and go off to Dagenham to buy rows of houses there. It'll make way for the likes of us.'

'How much are the houses?' said Jessie, holding back on her enthusiasm. A two up, two down was the very thing that she and Tom would be needing, now a baby was on the way – not that Emmie and Tom knew that.

'Three hundred pounds for each one, I heard,' Emmie continued, 'but that's way over the top. I should think the man will take a lot less than that. He's got other property to sell and he wants the cash quick to reinvest.' She breathed in as if the air was fresh off the sea. 'I've always fancied owning a bit of property.' Tom's sudden reflective mood gave her hope. She could see he was listening. 'Your dad's got a bit put by in his post office account, Tom, and Johnnie's got a few bob in the bank. You should think about it too, Hannah,' she said, without thinking.

'But I don't have any money, Emmie, you know that,' said Hannah.

'Not now ... no,' said Emmie. Quickly checking herself, she added, 'Well you know your dad's been sending money for years. I should think it's mounted up by now.'

'Yes, but my mother wouldn't give me any of that. It's hers. It's definitely hers.'

'Well, maybe she'll come round one of these days, eh?'

Jessie had slipped into a world of her own as she thought of herself and Tom owning a house. A surge of excitement rushed through her. Her hand instinctively moved across her stomach to where her baby was growing and she smiled inwardly. This was turning out to be a visit and a half. 'I've got some money coming to me,' she murmured dreamily. 'If I have a word with Mum ... she might be interested in making an investment.'

Tom chuckled quietly, and Emmie glared at him. 'You think it's funny, do you?'

'I think that you talking like a property magnate is, Mother. Hilarious. You're living with the fairies again,' he said, adding to the insult, which made Jessie see red.

'I think your mother's right, Tom.' Relaxing into the armchair, Jessie felt a strange calm come over her. 'But if there is going to be a war, would it be wise to buy houses around here, Emmie?'

'It's a risk but I think it's one worth taking. We can take out insurance, don't forget, and war or no war, in a few years that row of houses'll be worth a damn sight more than the landlord'll accept right now.'

'Could we go and see inside them today?' asked Jessie, surprising everyone.

Tom's patronising chuckle riled Jessie but she held her tongue. 'I thought you had more sense than that, Jess,' he said, 'listening to the ramblings of an old woman.'

'I would like to see them!' snapped Jessie, furious with him for the way he was patronising both her and his mother. 'Because you see, Emmie' she went on impulsively, 'I'm having your son's

baby.' There was a stunned silence in the room. 'So we'll be needing a little place of our own – or I will, at least.'

The silence continued to hang in the air.

'I hadn't meant to break the news like this.' Jessie added, 'but since those houses are coming up . . .'

It was Dolly who broke the deathly hush. 'God, Jessie, Mum will do her *nut*. Phew. And you'll cop it, Tom.' Dolly sounded genuinely worried. Scared even.

'Well, well, well. There's one in the eye for all of us,' said Emmie, stunned.

'When our Jessie drops a bombshell she really drops one.' Dolly shook her head as if it was the end of the world. 'Mum'll blame you, Tom. She won't have you in our house now. You've done it now. She'll send Jess away, and once the baby's born, she'll get it adopted . . . and she won't let Jessie ever see you—'

'That's enough, Dolly,' said Jessie. She looked across the room at Tom. There wasn't a flicker of movement in his face or his eyes. Then he licked his lips with his tongue, swallowed, then licked them again. He was well and truly knocked for six.

'What the bleeding hell's going on?' Charlie stood in the doorway. 'It's like a morgue in 'ere. What's 'appened? Em?'

'It's all right, Charlie,' said Emmie, as if in a trance. 'Tom's having a baby, that's all.'

There was a moment's pause while Charlie took this in. 'Fair enough,' he said, rubbing his chin. 'St Peter's. It'll have to be St Peter's. All my family have wedded there and been christened there.'

'St Dunstan's is my church,' said Jessie to Charlie. She had found an ally. A prop.

'Well, you please yourself, gel. We'd best 'ave your mother over for tea, though, to talk about it. I haven't seen Rose in years.'

'Go and check that tap in the back yard, would you, Charlie,'

said Emmie, glaring at her husband. 'I think someone might have left it running.'

'You what? Tch. Wasting bloody water,' he grumbled, turning to leave.

'Do you know Mum then?' said Dolly, mystified. 'Jessie never said anything about—'

'No, I didn't. Because I never knew,' said Jessie, looking at Tom for an explanation.

Emmie flicked her hand at Charlie, a casual signal for him to leave. He made a hasty exit. 'That was donkey years ago,' she said, covering herself. 'It's a pity the silly old sod's short-term memory is not so good. He was the one who left the tap running. So,' she said, shaking her head gravely, 'we have a little problem then.'

Turning away from Emmie's chiding eyes, Jessie braced herself for what was to come, hoping that Tom might take the lead, but it was not to be.

Emmie finally spoke. 'You have shocked me, Jessie, taken the wind out of all our sails, I should think.'

'So, shall we all go and look at those two up, two downs then?' said Jessie, desperate to avoid any debate on the matter.

'I think you might have told me when we were on our own,' said Tom, his face drawn with worry.

'I was going to but . . . it just came out. I'd said it before I knew.' She bit on her bottom lip. 'I'm sorry.'

He looked away from her and drew breath. 'It would have been nice to be the first to be told.'

Charlie came back into the doorway, easing the tension. 'I'll have to give the place a coat of emulsion, Em, if there's to be a wedding. We got any more of that green paint left?'

'You've been at that bloody whisky bottle, 'aven't you?' Emmie said, bemused by his casual handling of the situation. 'I marked the label so I'll know, Charlie.'

He flapped his hand and left, making for the street door. His voice once again cut through the awkward silence. He was on the doorstep outside, calling to a neighbour. 'Harry, mate!

Come and 'ave a drink. Our Tom's just got himself engaged. Fetch Winnie and the girls. I'll send one of my lads out for a crate of beer!'

'Charlie! Come inside! You bloody fool!' Emmie turned to Jessie, apologising. 'Showing us all up like that. I'll take the rolling pin to him, so help me. Charlie! Get in here!'

'Oh, don't be like that, Em,' said Charlie, back in the doorway. 'This is a proud moment for me. We're gonna 'ave a wedding at last . . . and I'm gonna be a grandfather.'

'Go upstairs and have a wash and shave. And put on a clean shirt! We'll all go round the pub once Tom and Jessie get back from . . . where they're going.' She didn't want to tell him about the houses and start him off again. 'Save your invites for the wedding day, you bloody fool.' She turned to Jessie and did her best to make things easier for her. 'Well, go on then, the pair of you. Go and take a look at what we were talking about. See what you think.'

Jessie caught on. She could see the sense in not letting on to Charlie just yet.

'And that's it, Mother?' said Tom, baffled. 'No angry lectures? No excitement? Nothing?' He sounded let down by the casualness of it all. He was, after all, going to be a dad.

'It's a bit late for lectures. Save the excitement for when you get back from Grant Street. And as for nothing, don't you ever call my grandchild a nothing!'

Tom's face broke into a smile and then quiet laughter. 'She's taking over already, Jess.'

Jessie looked back at him, smiling shyly as the happiness slowly returned.

Practically pushing Tom and Jessie out of the door, Emmie said goodbye to Dolly and asked her to pass on her best to their mother. 'You'd better not let on to your mother that it's out in the open,' she said. 'We don't want her thinking I wormed it out of Jessie first. Have a drop of brandy ready, though, for both your sister and your mother. They'll need it.

She's not going to be the least bit happy about this, make no mistake.'

Outside in the street, Jessie took Tom's arm and squeezed it, whispering in his ear that she loved him and wanted to have his baby more than anything. Before he could respond, his brother Stanley yelled to him from the end of the turning.

'Tom! Hang about. Where you going?' Stanley, looking rugged and handsome in his work clothes and boots, swaggered towards them, his eye on Dolly.

'We're just off to see a man about a dog, Stan. Catch you later, boy.'

'Hold your horses, Tom. Slow down.' Arriving at Dolly's side, he gave her the once over and then winked. 'Who's this then?'

'Jessie's sister, Dolly. Jessie, meet my kid brother, Stanley.'

'Hello, Stanley,' smiled Jessie, loving his style.

'All right, Jess?' He spoke as if he'd known her for an age. He turned back to Dolly. 'Fancy coming out for a beer tonight?'

'I don't drink beer,' she said. 'Mine's a port.'

'Whoooo, the girl's got taste, Tom. I'll call for you at eight. Be ready.' Giving them a quick nod, he slipped into the house, calling to Charlie, telling him to put the kettle on.

Dolly was over the moon. 'Well, it looks like I won't be going out with my mates tonight after all,' she said with a huge smile.

Having told Stanley off for shouting in the street, Emmie went back into the sitting room. Hannah was still there, alone and looking sad. 'You should have gone with them, love. Why didn't you?'

'They didn't ask me. I wasn't part of that happy scene.' She smiled bravely. 'It's all right, Emmie, I understand. I'm not really family . . .'

'Don't talk so daft. But what about this shocking news, eh?' How Emmie longed to sit down and tell her that she was going to be an aunt.

Hannah made no response. She sat gazing at the fireplace, miles away.

'Of course you're family, Hannah,' said Emmie, patting her hand. 'Don't be upset, they'll realise you've been left behind and be more the sorry for it. Excitement got the better of them, that's all.'

'No, I don't think so. My place is with my mother whether I like it or not – until I move away, that is.' Hannah raised her eyes to Emmie's. 'Do you know what she said to me the day after Tom was beaten up, when I was in bed crying over it? "You think that lying in bed will make your friend better, Hannah? No one, *no one*, feels sorry for those who feel sorry for themselves. Get up and open the windows, let the air in. All I can smell in here is stale air and stale clothes." Why does she hate me so much, Emmie? What did I do?'

Gutted, Emmie swallowed. 'There's always the attic room, Hannah. I've told you that before. We could clear it out and make space for a single bed and a cupboard. It wouldn't be the Grand but it's better than ... living with that woman.'

'That woman. She's my mother and yet I also think of her as that woman. Why? I just don't understand. Look how you are with your sons.' She turned back to the fireplace. 'But never mind, I'll find a room somewhere soon, further away from here. I can't take much more, Emmie. I can't bear it in that place, not even in my own room. And she's the one to blame for Tom joining the Blackshirts, not me.'

'You think I don't know that? I know your mother better than you think, Hannah.'

'She tells me over and over, "You have no pluck, no mettle. I spit on you." Tell me, Emmie, tell me the truth, do other mothers talk to their children like that? Am I too sensitive, like she says?'

'You are sensitive, love, and that's no bad thing. But no, a mother doesn't usually say such things.'

'I thought that Tom wouldn't want to see me again after

he was beaten up. I didn't think I would be welcome here, but I was wrong. You've been kind to me, all of you, but it's time I sorted out a life for myself.

'It's a very strange thing, but once my mother had finished going on at me that morning, a kind of feeling of freedom passed over me. I opened the curtains in my room to let in fresh air and sunshine, and as it flooded in, quite suddenly I was filled with a sensation that someone was there, giving me love and comfort and hope. I didn't hear a voice exactly but a message ran through my brain – the very gentle voice of a man. "It's all right, Hannah," he said. "Everything is going to be all right." Does that sound foolish?'

'No, Hannah, it doesn't.' Deeply moved by what she had said, Emmie took time to settle herself. Hannah could not know that on that morning her real father, Robert, had been killed. While she was lying on her bed, he was lying dead in the River Thames.

Shuddering, Emmie collected herself. 'It's a strange world we live in, Hannah, a very strange world.'

'Do you think it's possible that my father was picking up on my misery, from all those miles away in New Zealand?'

'It's possible, love, who are we to say?'

'Emmie . . .' Hannah's eyes moistened. 'Why didn't he come back for me?'

This was all a bit too much for Emmie, this conversation. What could she say to Hannah? What could she say to make her feel worthy of herself? She didn't know why Jack hadn't come back for her. She wasn't a mind reader.

'He will come for you, Hannah. He said he would and he will. I expect he's been saving for the fare all these years, his fare over here and both fares back. That's a lot of money, love, and it would take a long time for him to save that much.' She said this having decided that as soon as Hannah left to go home, she would write to Rose's brother Jack in New Zealand. Enough was enough. It was time he got over here and sorted things

out. Rose would know his address, surely, or Grandmother Blake, if it came to that.

Once Hannah had gone home, Emmie made the most of the quiet to think about the eventful afternoon and wondered if outside forces were at work, herding Rose and herself together again and into pastures they'd visited before.

Chapter Nine

Jessie was pleased to find that Grant Street was only a five-minute walk from Tom's house. Had it been further they would have got into conversation about her condition and she didn't want that. That would come later when she and Tom were by themselves. Looking at him, she could see that he was in a daze, one minute a wry smile on his face and the next thoughtful.

'They must be the ones,' said Tom, looking across the narrow road at four houses in the terrace. There weren't any For Sale boards out but it was obvious that no one was living in any of them.

'Looks like someone's got here before you,' said Dolly, looking up at a window where a woman was staring out at them.

'Stroke of luck,' smiled Tom. 'Let's hope they've got keys to all four houses.'

They crossed the narrow cobbled road and while Jessie peered into the filthy downstairs windows, Tom knocked on the door. It wasn't long before they heard footsteps echoing on the floorboards. 'Let me do the talking, girls, all right?' he said.

'Ay ay, Captain,' said Dolly, giving a fine salute which Tom ignored. 'House ahoy!'

'Daft as a brush,' he said. 'Should go down well with Stanley.'

The door, after a couple of jerks from the inside and a nudge from Tom's foot, finally opened to reveal a man in his fifties, wearing a suit and tie.

'What can I do for yer?' he said, frowning, as if they had disturbed him.

Tom offered his hand. 'Sorry to bother you, mate, but we've just heard that these places are coming up for sale and I'm interested.'

'In all four of them?' The man eyed him suspiciously.

'Depends. Need a lot of work doing to 'em,' said Tom, stepping back and giving them the once over. 'Are you the owner or a contender?'

'I'm showing someone around. The couple's only interested in this one. I'm looking for three hundred and twenty for each one, but I'm a fair man and it's open to discussion.'

Hearing quiet conversation from the couple who had been viewing the upstairs, Tom gave Jessie and Dolly a sign to keep quiet.

'I think we've seen enough, thanks,' said the woman who looked to be in her thirties and down on her luck.

'More than enough,' said her husband, a short, squat man. 'If we can pay five shillings a week, we'll take it. Between us we can clean the rest of 'em up and caretake for yer, two years rent at five bob a week and you've got a deal.'

Ushering them out as quickly as possible, the owner told them he'd be in touch and then turned to Tom. 'Dreamers,' he said, rolling his eyes.

'All right to come in and have a butchers then?' Tom was behaving as if he had a wad of money burning a hole in his back pocket.

'Don't see why not. In you come. You as well, girls. Can't have you standing out there, can we? Someone might run off with yer. He's a lucky man, I'll say that for 'im, two women and looking to buy four houses. Can't be bad.'

'I'm his future sister-in-law, actually,' said Dolly, sweeping

past him. 'Growing mushrooms, are you, or is that damp I can smell?'

Laughing at her, the man closed the door behind them. 'You'll smell more than damp by the time you've viewed these properties, my love. If you're looking for fresh paint and lace curtains, you'd best look elsewhere.'

'Take no notice of her,' said Tom. 'She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Be all right once I shove a scrubbing brush and bucket of hot soda water in her hands.' He patted the passage wall. 'Trouble is, she's right. The place is damp.'

'That's why they're cheap. Mind you, it's not as bad as—'

'Cheap?' said Tom, stopping his flow. 'Who're you kidding? I do read the papers, you know. A new three-bedroom semi with garden and garage costs as much as you're asking for these slums. I wasn't born yesterday so show a bit of respect.'

Tom's audacity paid off. The man sniffed and considered. 'True,' he said finally, 'you can get a new house for what I'm asking but that's in the suburbs. Add fares or petrol onto that and—'

'How much?' said Tom, halfway amused by the charade.

'And you're after all four? Well, we landlords have to scratch each other's backs, I suppose.'

'I'm not a landlord, but I've got brothers and we might be interested if the price is right.'

'Mmm.' He sucked his teeth and slowly shook his head. 'It's one price for the dealer and one for the public, you see. We have to be fair. A dealer's got to make a profit, whereas you—'

'Six hundred for the four of 'em – if I like what I see once I've had a butchers at the insides.'

'Six hundred? You out of your mind or what? Six hundred. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. You are a card. Well now, let's see, *might* let them go for a grand if it's cash in hand. Can't say fairer than that.'

'Six hundred but not all in cash. There aren't many who could come up with that kind of money. Make it six and you

can have two hundred in notes.' Tom was thinking about Johnnie and his bank account.

'Well, you might as well take a look now that you've come. Rock-solid, these little houses. Built to last and only been standing for twenty-five years or so.'

'Is that right? So whoever had that date inscribed on the plaque outside was telling pork pies then.'

The man looked at Tom, his eyes narrowing. 'Outside, you say?'

'That's right. It's filthy but my eyes are good. Eighteen ninety.'

'Do you know, I've never noticed that. Well, that throws a different light on things. That was a very good year for building houses, and once you've got all the windows and the back door open, I reckons this damp'll dry out. It makes no odds to me anyway, these'll be gone by the end of next week at the price I'm asking. I hate to let them go but I've been made an offer I can't refuse – in Dagenham. Row of cottages, ten of 'em. They were gonna be demolished to make space for a factory, some kind of fashion industry.' He shrugged. 'I should get a good price for 'em once I've done them up a bit. They're more for your middle-class sort of person.'

'Is it all right if we look round then?' said Dolly, breaking up the chummy monologue.

'Course it is.' He looked at his wristwatch. 'Fifteen minutes and I'll be back. Here, take the keys so you can have a look at the others as well. One's much the same as the other but you'll still want to go over 'em. I can see you've got your wits about you. If you can raise the six hundred for all four, you'd be a fool not to grab 'em. If you are interested, I can arrange for electricity to be wired.' He tapped the side of his nose. 'You name it, I've got the contacts.'

'That's decent of you, trusting me with the keys.' Tom looked him straight in the eye and waited for the catch.

'Well, you're 'ardly gonna run off with 'em, are you? Ta ta,

girls – for now.' With a wink and a grin, he strode off down the road.

'Tom? You didn't really expect him to come down that much in price, did you?' asked Jessie.

'I'm kicking myself, Jess, I should have said five hundred. Never mind, we'll send Mother round to see him, she'll get it down to five for us, you'll see. Right then.' Tom rubbed his hands together. 'You girls check this one out while I take a look at the others. Don't forget to look at the back yard – and the lav.' Tom went straight out and into the house next door.

'Well, this is all exciting, Jess. I wonder if there's a cellar.' Without another word, Dolly was gone, in search of treasure, leaving Jessie to herself.

She placed the flat of her hand on the passage wall and checked all along it and yes, it was damp here and there, and the place did smell of dirt, but there was something appealing about it. She hadn't seen any of the rooms, but she liked the house. Leaning on the passage wall she imagined it with fresh white paint on the woodwork and delicately flowered wallpaper. Plain white nets and curtains at the window, nice lino on the floor and a couple of rugs.

Dolly returned, wiping the dust from her hands onto the skirt of her frock. 'Why does this house seem much older than ours when it's not?'

'Because it's not lived in, Dolly. What would you expect?' Jessie was already being defensive about the house, as if it was her own.

'Maybe it's because it's got a cellar and the rooms are small, but it's got a good feel about it,' said Dolly. 'It reminds me of my local history teacher. He used to live down this road when he taught at our school. He wanted the class to go on a tour of his house, which hadn't been touched, other than cleaned, since it had been built. Even the wallpaper was original, so he said. He was posh but loved the East End,' Dolly prattled on, 'especially Bethnal Green which, according to him, was the nicest of the

villages, surrounded by woods, with a small wooden church and cottages. He said the village was ruled by the Lord of the Manor in Chaucer's time. He'd go on for hours about Chaucer, where he lived, where he ate, what he did for entertainment. It is interesting, mind you,' she continued, opening a corner cupboard and flinching at the sight of a spider. 'Chaucer took lodgings in the Gate House, over the Ald Gate. The rooms had a cellar beneath and when the first bell of the day tolled, the great gates were swung open and—'

'Yeah, all right, Dolly. You do get carried away. Could you see anything in the cellar or is it too dark down there?'

'Too dark.' She turned and leaned on the wall, arms folded, still there, back in the days of Chaucer. 'Grain and dung carts would arrive from Essex, cattle being driven through, and pigs, headed into Smithfields.'

'You amaze me sometimes, Dolly. How you fitted so much information into your brain, I don't know. Maybe that's why you 'ave trouble taking things in now, it's all crammed with Chaucer.'

'Yeah, but just imagine it, Jess. The lowing of cattle, the creaking rattle of carts and the clip of hooves. Street vendors shouting, "*Rabbit and venison pie! Roast pork! Pheasant! Eels peppered! Saffron mackerel!*" Not to mention "*Strawberries, ripe! Strawberries ripe!*"'

'You'll end up being carted off yourself if you go on like that. Come on.'

'I've seen enough,' said Dolly. 'I'll go and find Tom and look at the others. Let's hope they haven't got rats in the back yard as well. I saw one run along the fence, just [illegible]'

'Dolly, that's not funny!'

'It wasn't meant to be, don't get so aerated, Jessie, think of *the baby*.' Dolly grinned, pleased at the thought of becoming an auntie. 'Anyway, a single rat's nothing. One trap and it'll be dead. Clonk!'

'If it really was one then there'll be more,' said Jessie.

'I wish I hadn't mentioned it now, one single rat and you go white. There won't be another plague, don't worry. The plague bell won't toll, Jessie.'

'Dolly, stop it. Go and find Tom and drive *him* mad.'

Thankful to be in the house by herself, Jessie walked cautiously around, looking and listening for any signs of vermin. Her fears soon dissolved as she went from one small room to another and out into the back yard. She loved the place. When she caught sight of a mouse scampering around an old ruined shed, she shuddered and then smiled. At least Dolly was wrong about the rat. You won't find rats where there are mice, her mother had always insisted.

Standing in the middle of the downstairs room, Jessie admired the small old-fashioned cupboards and shelves. They gave the place a cottage feel. The scullery had an open fireplace which smelled of damp coal and there were antiquated brass oil lamps hanging in every room. In each of the fireplaces, there were gas pokers and on the windowsills burned down candles. Cobwebs were everywhere.

Above the street door there was an arched coloured-glass window, with just one small crack in one of the panes. The sun shining through cast a ray of yellow and pink light into the hallway. Jessie avoided the cellar which was small and pitch black. The two bedrooms upstairs were fine and once they had peeled off the layers of lino, she felt sure it would smell a lot better. The late afternoon sun seemed to be shining in through every window, as if it was welcoming her into this new home. She wondered what Tom was making of the other three and of Dolly's chatter.

'It's true, Tom, honest, Stepney *was* a village, with rich and poor, farmers and millers – a thriving village. And I'll tell you something else. Way back, the Duchess of Suffolk had a house in Stepenham and a marquis had a mansion just by the church.

Our part of the woods was seen as a *rural retreat*. London's back yard, more like. Still is.'

'Do me a favour, Doll, and pass me that old bit of curtain cane on the windowsill. I want to measure this room,' said Tom, paying not the slightest attention to her ramblings.

Sighing, Dolly handed him the curtain rod. 'I'm going next door, see what Jessie's up to.' She left him to it, wondering why he couldn't show just a bit of interest in the way things used to be.

'Tom's been in and out of all the other three, she said, joining Jessie in one of the bedrooms. 'I bet that brass bed'd come up a treat. Some of the bits of furniture want chucking on the bonfire but some of it's solid oak and sound. Did you see that bedside cabinet in the other bedroom? I should imagine that's an antique. Early Victorian.'

'I wouldn't want it.'

'I wasn't thinking of using any of it, Jessie. I'd clean it up, polish it, and put it in the auction rooms. My friend's dad does that – he earns out of it as well. Used to be a rag and bone man. Now he's gone upmarket.'

'You upstairs, girls?' called Tom from below.

'Yes. Come on up!'

'No need,' he called back. 'I've seen enough. I wanna get back and fetch Mum and the boys to have a look, while I've still got the keys.'

'Looks like someone's thinking of going into the property market,' said Dolly. 'We'd best get home, you've got some music to face.'

Not wishing to spoil her present carefree mood, Jessie ignored Dolly's reminder of the battle to come. 'So you like it then?' she said as they went down the stairs.

'I will once you've scrubbed it. Don't know what Mum'll think though.'

'I think she'll like it,' murmured Jessie, 'and she'll love the

idea of a Warner owning their own house. It's what she and Dad always wanted.'

'Mmm,' smiled Dolly, 'but not quite as soon as this.'

Closing the front door behind them and linking arms with Tom, Jessie was touched to see that her sister was being thoughtful and strolling ahead, giving them a chance to talk privately about buying one of the houses. 'What do you think then?' she said, hoping Tom liked what he'd seen as much as she did.

'I think you'll make the best mum in the world, Jessie Warner.' He put his arm round her waist and gently squeezed her. 'The best mum and the best wife. I'm the luckiest man alive.'

'That's not what I meant, I was talking about the house. I daren't ask how you feel about ... well, you know.'

'Shocked. Bloody shocked. But I keep seeing this tiny little version of you,' he said, his emotions stirred. 'Anyway, the house. If we can buy the four off him, we'd get a good deal. How we'll raise the money is something else but we've got to do it, it makes sense.' He grinned broadly. 'The Smiths owning property. That'll be one in the eye for some of the neighbours, I can tell you, and Mum deserves the thrill she'd get from it. She's been a grafter all her life, Jessie. So has Dad. There are four working men and one working woman at home and Johnnie's got enough cash in the bank to buy one for himself. He'll put in a word with the bank manager for the rest of us. I don't like to ask, Jess, but—'

'There'll be enough from my share of the compensation money for us to buy one. Mum says it should all be settled in a month or two.'

'No. I didn't mean that. I meant will you be able to manage? If I get one of these mortgages, well, we'd be a bit struck for cash for a while. I'll get two jobs, of course I will, but—'

'Tom I want to use the money to buy that house, there's no point in lining the bank's coffers with interest payments. If

we use my money, we can use your wages to do the place up a bit and buy some furniture – second-hand furniture that we can paint nice light colours. We don't have to move in straightaway and we needn't get married for another two months – that's if you want to get married.'

'Nah, not me, you'll have to find someone else. Sod that for a lark,' he said, sounding serious. 'I'll still buy one of them houses though, in case I find someone I do want to marry.'

'Stop it, Tom. I've been worried sick in case you wanted to get rid of me.'

'Oh, thanks. You think I'd do a thing like that, do you?'

She squeezed his hand. 'Sorry. I was just checking. Anyway, can we use my money to buy it?'

'No. That's your money, Jessie. I'm not touching that.'

'Once we're married, it'll be *our* money, Tom. I'll tell you what, I'll do a deal with you. I'll say no more about you having joined the Blackshirts, because I know you have, if you let me do what I want to do with my own funds. If your brothers and your mum manage to buy the other three, all well and good, but don't bank on it. Let's just think about us.'

'Fair enough, Jess, but if you use your money, the house'll be in your name. It's your name that goes on the deeds or nothing.'

'That sounds fair,' she said, not caring one way or the other.

'If you're really sure it's what you want ... I'll work day and night to make it like a little palace for you. I can get a bit of work down the market as well as at the docks. I'll work my fingers to the bone. I will, Jessie. I'll work till I drop.' Taking her by surprise, he let go of her hand and lifted her high in the air. 'My Jessie, having my baby. What more could a man want?'

'A two up, two down?' she said, laughing. 'Put me down, Tom. You might drop me.'

'Never in a million years would I drop you, sweetheart.' He slowly lowered her until her feet touched the ground, and kissed

her. 'I love you, Jess. I love you so much it hurts. I've driven the blokes down the docks mad, telling them how lovely my Jessie is.'

'I love you as well,' she said, brushing a kiss across his cheek, 'but I've got to get back home now, to face Mum. She's not gonna be as thrilled about this as we are.'

'Do you want me to come with you?' he said, but half-heartedly.

'No. That wouldn't go down very well. She'll want me to herself so she can vent her anger. I'm going to have to look a very sorry daughter, Tom, full of regret. No, I don't think your being there'll help, the opposite in fact.'

'Thank God for that.' He gave her a peck on the cheek. 'I was dreading you'd want me to be there. Go on then. Catch Dolly up. I've got a meeting to go to.'

A deep and worried sigh escaped from Jessie. 'I hope you haven't joined just to get your own back, Tom. It was a street brawl and you came off worse. Why can't you just leave it at that?'

'It's not revenge, Jessie. I believe in the cause. I love my country and I don't want to see it going down the pan with every Tom, Dick and Harry coming in from every bloody country. I'm not saying we should kick out all the foreigners, they're here now, but something's got to be done to stop them pouring in. Britain's not that big a place, and England's a lot smaller. It stands to reason, if you pour too much beer into a glass, what happens?'

'It spills over and makes a mess. Trust you to use beer as an example.'

'Now stop worrying over it and mind your own business.' He glanced at her stomach. 'You've got enough to think about now.'

'But they're Fascists, Tom.'

'Fascists. People say that as if it's the devil with horns they're talking about.' He shrugged. 'It's no more than a bunch of

politicians trying to do what they think is right for their country. You can't blame 'em for that, Jess, and before you even think of asking, no, I won't be chalking insults on walls or throwing bricks through windows. But I will go to the meetings, and I will march with them, and I will beat the drum. I'll beat the drum for England. Our England, Jessie. Our children's England.' Smiling at her, he brushed loose strands of hair off her face. 'I promise you one thing, if war comes, Blackshirts and Jews will fight alongside each other, the same as we live alongside each other, the same as we love to have a good punch-up now and then, and the same as we fall in love with each other. You loved Max – he was a Jew. I once courted a girl who was Jewish and she adored me. Couldn't keep her hands off!' He kissed the tip of her nose and winked. 'Stop thinking about things that don't concern you. Think about what kind of wallpaper you'd like to see in the nursery instead. I think the back bedroom'd make a smashing little nursery.'

Quietly laughing at him, Jessie shrugged off her worry. 'I don't agree but I don't care, not right now.' She did care but that could wait until they were married, then she'd change his way of thinking. 'So you liked it then? The house I was looking at?'

'I preferred one of the others which had a little lean-to out the back. We could use that for a kitchen, once I'd fixed the broken panes and that.'

'We could let that second bedroom – until baby comes along,' said Jessie, thinking of Hannah.

'That's true.' He held each side of her face and kissed her. 'See you later. Good luck with your mother.'

Stepping up her pace to catch Dolly, Jessie was filled with thoughts of the future and the last person on her mind right then was Max, but there he was, standing outside the Bancroft Hospital, chatting to Dolly. She hadn't seen him since the day she threw his gifts back at him.

'Hello, Jessie,' he said, looking sheepishly at her. 'You look well.'

'Thanks. How are you – and the family?' She could feel herself blush. 'Your mum and dad all right?'

'So so.'

The awkward silence that followed was broken by Dolly who once again was being tactful. 'Nice to see you again, Max.' She turned to Jessie and winked. 'I'll see you back at the house.'

'Don't say anything, Dolly!' Jessie called after her. Dolly didn't look back but just raised a hand.

'She's growing up at last,' said Max, smiling. 'I suppose that's because of your dad. It takes shock and grief to pull us round sometimes.'

Jessie decided to get to the point. 'Seeing a photo of you kissing another girl gave me a jolt, I can tell you, but I can see now that Moira had a point, we weren't really right for each other, not for marriage, and I think you know that, Max, deep down.'

'My family don't rule my life, you know. They couldn't see it working but that doesn't mean to say that I felt the same. You did though,' he shrugged, 'so there we are. One little lecture from Moira and you ran. I think I had more of a shock than you, Jessie.'

'Are you seeing the girl in the photograph, Max?'

'Of course I see her, I've been seeing her since I was very small. Her family and mine are very close. I've taken her out a couple of times since we broke up, yes.'

'Well, there you are then. There must be something between you and there's no way I would have put up with that.'

Max looked sad. 'But I still love you, Jessie. I'll always love you. If anything goes wrong, promise you'll come and see me, or write. Promise?'

'Do things have to go wrong then? For us to stay friends?' Jessie smiled, trying to cheer him up.

'No, we don't have to wait for that.'

'Max . . .' Jessie searched for the right words. 'Max, don't wait for me and Tom to break up. It's not going to happen.

I know it's all a bit sudden but,' she clenched her hands, her fingernails digging into her flesh, 'we're going to be married, quite soon.' She reeled off the last line very quickly.

'That's absurd, Jessie, and you know it. You know nothing about each other. How could you in so short a time?'

'I love him, Max,' she said, shrugging. 'We've been together a while now. I don't need longer than that.'

He looked from her face to her stomach. 'Well, I hope it all goes right for you. Dolly said something and I guessed [illegible]'

'Oh. Well, it's not a case of *having* to, if that's what you think,' Jessie said hastily.

'No, it's not a case of having to because I would marry you tomorrow. I wouldn't mind about ...' He nodded at her stomach. 'I would bring it up as my own.' He took her hand and moved closer. 'Jessie, please don't marry that man. It's too quick. Marry me instead. Please, darling, I'm begging you. Don't do it. Please don't do it.'

That man. Max had referred to Tom as *that* man. Did he know already? Had he found out more about Tom than he was letting on? 'Tom's a decent bloke, Max.'

'No, Jessie. He's not. I know what I'm talking about. I know his brother, Johnnie.'

Jessie slowly withdrew her hand and smiled weakly. 'Maybe in another life, eh?'

'This *is* our life, Jessie. We should be together.'

She was beginning to feel trapped. 'Look, let me come round to see you now and then, or let's meet up for coffee. We don't have to cut each other off. You'll find someone else to love, a nice Jewish girl, someone who'll fit in. Let's stay friends.'

He looked down at the ground. 'If that's what you want. It's better than nothing. You can phone me at the office.' He slipped his hand inside his pocket and pulled out a small wad of business cards. 'I've been promoted,' he smiled. 'Junior accountant. I get to deal with the small uncomplicated clients.'

'You deserve it.' She took the card and nodded. 'I'll have to go. I've got to break the news to Mum. Don't say anything, will you, to Moira or your mum and dad or—'

'Of course I won't say anything. Besides, you're not married to him yet.' Choked, he turned and walked away, thinking that he would make it his business to keep in touch with her, married or not. Once she learned that Tom was a Fascist, she would be shocked, he thought.

When Jessie arrived home, she found Rose in the kitchen boiling the whites. Jessie signalled for Dolly to go upstairs, so that she and their mother could be by themselves. Searching for the right words, Jessie sat on the low windowsill and glanced out at the back garden. She thought about her dad and what he would have said. No matter how hard she tried to picture his reaction, she couldn't. She couldn't even picture herself telling him.

'Mum,' she said, her voice a dead give-away, 'I've got something to tell you, something that you're not going to be pleased about.'

'Go on then,' said Rose in a tone that suggested she was expecting a confession. 'Your sister hasn't said a word out of place but I could tell that something's happened.' She paused. 'Has it got something to do with your visit to Tom's house?'

'Not really. It had already happened before I went. But Tom did ask me to marry him while I was there and I said yes.' She kept her eyes lowered. Her mother's silence told her that she had guessed – there was no need to spell it out.

'I should have realised when you fainted that morning,' said Rose, her tone resigned and dispirited. 'I should have known then. Does Max know?'

'Max? Why do you ask that?'

'Well, he is the father, isn't he? He's got every right to know. He might well want to marry you himself, and I can't say I wouldn't prefer him for a son-in-law, even though he has taken liberties with you.'

'Max isn't the father,' said Jessie, closing her eyes and waiting for the explosion.

'What do you mean?' Rose sounded appalled.

'I'm carrying *Tom's* baby, Mum. We shouldn't have made love but—'

'Good gracious . . .' Rose grabbed the back of a kitchen chair and steadied herself. 'I've never heard such talk. Where do you think you are? In a *brothel*? You bring shame on our good name. I dread to think what your father would say . . . God rest his soul.' She lowered herself into the chair. 'That things should come to this,' she murmured, her voice breaking. 'You've not been with the scoundrel for five minutes.'

'I love him. Really love him. I thought I loved Max but I didn't, I mistook what we had for love. He realises that as well, deep down, that's why he never came round. He's a smashing feller, Mum, but if I married him it wouldn't last five minutes. Either that or we'd both regret it and stay together in a third-rate marriage to keep up appearances.'

'And you think that this fly-by-night will make you happy? Because I don't. I give it a year, if that, before he's off somewhere else.'

'How can you *say* that? You don't *know* him. I'm sorry it's not Max, I know that's what you wanted, to see me off with a solid, reliable husband, but what good is that without love?'

'Rubbish! Love. You don't know what you're talking about. You've a lot to learn yet, my girl. A lot.'

'I know. I've got to learn how to be a mother.'

'There's no "got to" about it! You can have an abortion. I know a decent midwife who'll do it and keep it under wraps. I'll shame myself by going to her over this but it'll be less of a disgrace than letting everyone watch your stomach grow, and you only knowing the father for a second. It'll be all round the streets. We've never had a scandal before, never. I'll thank you not to mention it to anyone, especially my sons.' Rose couldn't know how much she was hurting Jessie with her words.

'I want to have my baby,' she said.

'Out of the question.' Rose shook her head. 'Out of the question.'

'I'm not going to kill my own flesh and blood.'

'You *are* killing your own flesh and blood! You're killing *me*! Haven't I had enough heartache? Wasn't it enough that your father put pride before his fall? He got into that crane *knowing* it was dangerous. *Knowing* he was taking a risk. He left me a widow with *four* children to take care of. Wasn't that *enough*! Did you have to add to it by acting like a whore!'

'I'm sorry. I didn't want this to happen. But it has and I'm keeping it.' Tears were running down Jessie's face.

They made no difference to Rose, she would not allow emotions to rule the day. 'Either you get rid of it or you leave this house. I'll wash my hands of you. I'll have nothing to do with weddings, births or a blighted marriage.' She brought her hand down onto the table with a crashing blow. 'I'll have *nothing* more to do with you if you have this baby! And what's more, you can't marry that man!'

'Why not?'

'You just can't, that's all! That's all there is to it. You will not marry him or see him again! Now let that be an end to it!'

Pressing her hands against her face, Jessie tried to stop crying but it was hopeless; she loved her mother and couldn't bear to hear her saying such things. She loved her father and wanted him to be there, to make everything all right.

'If you go through with this,' said Rose more calmly, 'I mean what I say. You'll have to go. You can have your share of the compensation for the death of your father to set up home. There's no more discussion.'

'What if I went away and had it adopted?' said Jessie desperately. 'I would do that if you'd let me go on seeing Tom. If it all works out we could marry later on, in a year or so.'

Rose shuddered and turned her back on Jessie. 'I don't want

to talk about it any more. I can't think straight. I've had a shock. Leave me be.'

Dolly came into the kitchen. Rose straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. 'Don't creep around like that, Dolly, there's a good girl,' she said. Jessie marvelled at how quickly she could pull herself together.

'I didn't mean to creep. Granny German's arrived. She's upstairs in the sitting room. I said that you and Jessie were having a few private words. Shall I tell her to come down or to go away?'

'Of course you won't tell her to go away, child. I didn't hear the door.'

'No. I was outside, sitting on the step. I saw her coming.'

Rose stood up and brushed her hands down her skirt and pushed her hair into place. 'Make a fresh pot of tea, Dolly, and bring a tray up to the parlour.' She checked her face and hair in the small mirror over the sink. Ignoring Jessie's eyes, she left the room.

Dolly let out a low whistle. 'Rather you than me.' She looked at Jessie's tear-stained face. 'That went down a bomb, didn't it?'

'Worse than I thought it would. She wants me to have an abortion, give up Tom, go back with Max. If I go against her wishes she'll cut me dead. I'll gain a husband and lose a mum. Not a bad day so far, is it?'

'I can't say I'm surprised, you did jump into bed a bit sharpish. I know Tom's irresistible but all the same . . .'

'I'm not ashamed of myself if that's what you think. I'm just angry for not making sure Tom had a Durex.'

'Oh, that's very nice. Speak your mind, don't you?'

'You can learn from my mistake. Don't let your boyfriend have his way unless he puts one on.' Jessie wasn't in the mood for niceties, she wanted to shock someone and Dolly was as good as anyone. 'You should use a Dr Rendall as well, just in case the rubber splits.'

'Stop being so *disgusting*. It's not clever. If Tom could hear you now ... I'm glad it's you getting married and not me. I'm not gonna put up with all that mucky business. It sounds revolting.'

'Why're you smiling then? I can tell you are, Dolly. Little Miss Innocent. Don't tell me that you and Fred didn't do anything naughty.'

'Course we did, but nothing like that! He used to slip his hand inside my knickers and massage me ... and that was lovely. But he never undid his flies when he rubbed against me, I would have punched him in the face if he'd tried that.'

When Dolly had gone upstairs with the tea tray, Jessie felt very low. Upstairs her fate was being discussed. She imagined her mother and Granny German discussing the best way to hide the disgrace – send her away to the country to have the baby and then give it away, or take her to a back street in Whitechapel where she would have it ripped from her. She started to cry again. It all seemed so unfair, what she and Tom had done had happened so naturally, they loved each other in a way that no one could understand and now they were being punished for it. She thought about the little house, her two up, two down with the lean-to that would have been turned into a proper kitchen. She glanced out of the window at the flowers in her dad's garden and imagined her own little house with vases and vases of flowers, picked from her own back yard.

'Mum said will you go up.' Dolly had returned.

'What does she want?'

'How am I s'posed to know?' she said, a touch indignant. 'I don't get talked to around here, I get told.'

'What kind of mood are they in?'

'Jumping for joy. What mood do you expect them to be in?'

Jessie gave her a look of contempt. 'I don't know why I bothered to ask, you're just a kid. What would you know?' She got out of the kitchen before Dolly could answer back – she had seen the flash of anger in her eyes.

'Miss High and Mighty!' Dolly yelled up the stairs after her. 'Not so *saintly* now, are you!' Her voice rang through the house; not only would her mother and grandmother hear, the tenants in the attic would too. 'They've got names for girls like you!'

Jessie ignored the insult and went into the sitting room, bracing herself to face both mother and grandmother.

'Pay no attention to Dolly,' said Rose quietly. 'It's reaction, shock. I dare say she's as shocked as I am.'

'Sit down, Jessie,' came Ingrid's quiet, controlled voice. 'Your sister has a lot to learn about people. You are not a whore – far from it.'

Jessie smiled weakly at her. 'I've got to get used to it. It's what everyone will say, in their own way.'

'You're not a bad girl, Jess,' said Rose. 'You've been feckless but you're not bad. Sit down now, we've something else to tell you.' Her voice was so low Jessie could hardly hear her.

'I think it might be better if you closed the door first,' suggested Ingrid.

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Jessie. 'I know what you're going to say and I'll just have to accept whatever you have in mind. So do what you want with me.' She turned to leave but Rose stopped her.

'Sit *down*, you silly girl. What I have to say has nothing to do with your condition. Besides, we've been talking. Your grandmother thinks you should marry your fiancé and have the baby.' Rose shuffled in her seat, embarrassed and uncomfortable.

'Fiancé? You mean ... Max?'

'No. I mean Tom. You can wear this for now,' she said, offering Jessie a ruby and diamond ring. 'You can keep it if you want. Don't thank me for it, thank your grandmother.'

Jessie looked from Rose to Ingrid, puzzled. Her grandmother gave a nod of approval, silently telling her to accept the gesture and to go easy on her mother. 'I haven't met this young man of yours,' she said, 'this Tom, but I have heard about him from time to time from his mother, Emmie. It would seem to

me that he is a caring and thoughtful youth. Do you love him? This Tom?'

'Of course I do. But I don't understand ... you know Emmie as well?'

'Yes I do. She's a good friend.'

The memory of Ingrid's first visit washed over her. She had mentioned Emmie then, but it hadn't occurred to Jessie that she was referring to Tom's mother. 'Everyone seems to know Emmie,' she said, miles away. She turned the ruby ring in her fingers. 'Thank you for this,' she said, 'it's lovely.' There was a moment of quiet as a more relaxed atmosphere took over the room. 'Was this the one that Grandfather gave to you when you got engaged?'

'Yes,' said Ingrid. 'Your mother would like you to wear it and I think you should have it. I know you were very dear to him – as I was, once.'

Bewildered, Jessie asked if she could go to her room for a while and talk again later on. All she wanted right then was to be by herself. To think and to cry by herself.

'No, Jessie.' Rose's tone was serious. 'I've something to tell you, something very important. Once you've taken in what I have to say, I'll call Dolly up. The boys can be told later, when they're in their beds.'

Worried as well as confused now, Jessie sat down. What could be more serious than her being pregnant?

'Now,' said Rose, 'what I have to say isn't going to be easy for me, Jess, and if it wasn't for your grandmother, I wouldn't be telling you at all.' Rose glanced at Ingrid and took a deep breath. 'I've just been told off, Jessie, by *my* mother.'

Thumbing her wedding ring, she began her story. She told Jessie that when she was in the same predicament, eighteen years ago, she and Robert had been courting for over two years before they broke the rules. She told her about Armistice and how overjoyed the women were when their men came home from war. Jessie wondered if she was telling her all of

this to help make her feel better about her *condition*, but she was wrong.

'The thing is, Jessie, me and your dad were very hard up, struggling to make ends meet. We could hardly afford to feed ourselves and pay rent on our rooms, let alone feed two babies.'

'*Two* babies? But Dolly wasn't born then.'

'No, that's right, but you were and ...' Rose swallowed and turned her face away, hiding the pain, 'so was your twin,' she whispered. 'I gave birth to twins, Jessie, non-identical twin girls.'

'You can't have,' said Jessie, a nervous smile on her face, 'you would have told me.' She looked to her grandmother, but Ingrid avoided her eyes.

'I should have told you ... me and your dad should have explained when the time was right, which is what we'd promised ourselves, but the time was never right.'

Jessie felt very strange, her emotions mixed. She was a twin? She had a twin sister? That feeling of someone being missing all through her life came flooding back.

'She died ...' murmured Jessie. 'I had a twin and she died. I think I knew.' She met Rose's troubled eyes. 'I always felt as if something was missing ... missing from me. She didn't die straightaway, did she?' Then, like a flash of lightning, she remembered the photograph of the twins in a pram.

'She didn't die, Jessie. We just couldn't afford to clothe and take care of two babies ... so we had to let someone else take care of one.'

'No!' An icy sensation swept across her, she shook her head, not wanting to hear it. 'No. You wouldn't do that. Dad wouldn't have done that. You wouldn't do that to us. We loved each other. She was part of me and I was part of her ...'

Both Rose and Ingrid were stunned by what Jessie was saying. Could it be that they had somehow stirred a deep memory within her? They slowly turned to look at each other

and then at Jessie, who had a strange, faraway expression. 'My twin,' she murmured, 'my twin, you took her away from me, you took her away and it was cold.'

Rose was too upset to speak. Ingrid moved across the room, sat on the arm of Jessie's chair and gently patted her back. 'It's the hardest thing of all, child, to give away your own flesh and blood. Like me, you mother did it for the very best of reasons, she had only you and your sister's welfare at heart.'

'Did you choose?' said Jessie, gazing into Rose's face. 'Did you pick and choose which one would go and which would stay?'

'No, it wasn't like that,' said Rose quietly.

'Where is she now?' asked Jessie, in a low, controlled voice.

'Not many miles away,' said Ingrid, lifting Jessie's chin and smiling at her. 'I think that once you have got over the shock, you are in for a nice surprise.'

'It's all right, Mum,' said Rose, 'I'll tell her.' She patted her face dry, cleared her throat and took a deep breath. 'There was a reason for my not wanting to entertain Tom, Jessie. And I have to confess that his mother, Emmie, tried her best to persuade me to tell you about Hannah before you found out from someone else. But I was so scared, Jessie . . .'

'Hannah? Did you say Hannah? Tom's Hannah?' A vision of Charlie standing in the doorway of Tom's living room swept across her mind, when he had said that he hadn't seen Rose in years. And Tom's mother, Emmie . . . who had brushed it off, saying she knew Rose from way back.

She wondered about Tom, about their first date when he stood her up. Had he been warned off? Jessie turned her attention to her grandmother. Hadn't she all but told her on *their* first meeting? Hadn't she said, *your mother gave away your sister*? More importantly, why had everyone kept the truth from her? From her and from Hannah? Or did she know too? Surely not? No . . . Hannah hadn't been told, of that she felt certain.

'Yes,' said Ingrid. 'Hannah is your twin sister. So you see, she was never gone for ever, *meine liebling*. It was destined that you would come together.'

'Of course she is,' murmured Jessie, trance-like, 'of course she's my twin. I knew that ... we both knew that ...' The tears were trickling down, a slow stream of tears. 'We felt something straightaway, I think, but we didn't know what it [redacted]'

Rising from her seat, a little unsteady, Jessie went to the window and stared out. 'Why isn't she here? Didn't she want to come?'

Concerned over her fragile state of mind, Ingrid went to her. 'She hasn't been told. She doesn't know that Gerta's not her real mother or that your uncle Jack is not her father.'

Jessie laughed bitterly. 'I never even knew she was supposed to be my cousin, let alone my twin. You weren't taking any chances, were you? All of my life I've missed her. I know you won't believe that, but I did, I missed someone and all the time it was Hannah.' She blew her nose and looked at Ingrid. 'I want to see her.'

'And so you shall. Come and sit and make it easier for your poor mother,' said Ingrid.

Allowing her grandmother to lead her back to the armchair, close to Rose, Jessie remembered the baby growing inside her. 'Maybe I'll have twins,' she murmured through her tears. She looked across at Rose. 'It's all right, Mum, I don't blame you. I don't blame anyone. I know it must 'ave been hard for you, having to tell me now.' She smiled faintly. 'I think your mum's bossier than mine.' That spontaneous quip broke the tension and lightened the heavy mood.

'You could be right there, said Rose, smiling. 'Your dad wanted to bring you together years ago, Jessie, but I was terrified you'd hate me for splitting you up, not to mention how Hannah would feel. It's only recently, after you'd met up with Tom and I started to see Emmie more often, that I learned how unhappy

she's been, living with that wretched woman. I thought she was wanted.'

'She'll be all right,' said Jessie. 'She'll be fine . . . we'll make up for it. We'll make up for everything. She can come and live with us now . . .'

Rose cautioned her. 'Maybe, but we *must* tread carefully and not rush into anything. I know it'll be hard for you, but you've got to be patient . . . and more importantly, you're to keep away from Hannah until we have a full family reunion.'

Jessie started. 'But why? Why can't I see her today? You've told *me* so—'

'Your uncle Jack is coming back to England and we have to wait until he's arrived. He especially requested, urged even, that we wait. Apparently he's been trying to get a transfer from the New Zealand office to London ever since he received the news that your dad had . . . met with an accident. But his arrival is fairly imminent. He'll let us know once he's here and ready to face Hannah.'

'You make Hannah sound like a judge,' Jessie said.

'Well,' said Rose, 'in a way both my brother and myself will be on trial. Hannah is in for a shock and one she won't be too pleased about. We've all been lying to her since she was a baby in a pram. I don't expect her to fall into my arms – blood mother or not.'

Jessie could hardly take it in. 'Everything's happening at once.'

Ingrid nodded. 'Yes, and not before time where you and your twin are concerned, and where your mother and I are concerned. It would seem that this is the year for estranged mothers and daughters to come together.'

'Yes . . . and estranged sisters . . . and brothers.' Jessie imagined the expression on her brothers' faces when they learned there was another one of them. 'You can live here too . . .' She spoke without looking at Ingrid. 'We can all live together.'

'There are tenants in your attic rooms who bring in rent for your mother and I have a nice flat all to myself, thank you.'

'The tenants could move into the rooms above the cobbler shop,' said Rose, tentatively. 'There's no reason for you not to come and live with us – unless you'd rather not.'

'I would rather not. I'm too set in my ways. I'll stay over by Victoria Park and you may visit me there. I don't know or care much for this part of the East End. And an invitation for Christmas would be nice. Christmas with grandchildren is how it should be. Pride has deprived me of that for too long.' Ingrid got up. 'Now I must make my way home.'

Showing Ingrid to the door, Rose thanked her, not just for the visit but for helping to sort out her mind and her life. 'Maybe now that we've cleared the air all round we can do some catching up,' she said.

'I would like that, Rose. I would like that very much. Do you know what my worst fear was? That one of us should die without us having repaired the bridge. That was my very worst fear. God does work in mysterious ways, doesn't He? The person responsible for bringing your family together is the very person who might have been the cause of pushing you and Jessie apart.'

'Tom?'

'Tom. *Auf wiedersehen.*'

Rose hugged her mother for the first time since their parting many years ago.

She went back into the sitting room filled with a sense of long-awaited relief, and was moved by the way her own child, Jessie, was curled up on the settee, still tearful but smiling. 'Well, things do have a way of working themselves out, don't they, Jess? We've got a long way to go yet. The gossips will have a good time denouncing the Warner family but, oh my Lord, how far along the road we've all come.'

Pulling her shoulders back, Rose suggested they call Dolly in to tell her about Hannah. 'Let's hope she won't be jealous.'

she said, 'or fearful that Hannah will take you away from her. Dolly's more sensitive than you think.'

'I know, but before she comes in, will you do something special for me? Will you hold me close and rock me, the way you used to when I was little?'

'Oh Jessie, what are we to do with you? One minute you're a woman and the next a baby,' said Rose, smiling and sitting next to Jessie on the settee, drawing her close. 'You don't want me to sing a lullaby as well, do you?'

'No, you can save that for when your first grandchild comes along.'

Chapter Ten

Turning out some freshly baked tarts, Charlie's favourite, Emmie was doing her best to soften up her husband who had never like meddling in other people's affairs.

'I just don't think you should get involved, Em, that's all I'm saying.' He licked a finger and turned the page of the *Betting News*. 'Leave it to the Warner family, let them sort it out. You'll get no thanks if it goes wrong or if it comes right.'

Emmie smiled to herself; her Charlie could go on at times, repeating himself over and over.

'You're like a record on the blooming gramophone with the needle stuck, Charlie,' she said. 'If that's not the fifth time you've said it today, I'm a Dutch herring.' Of course he had a point and in other circumstances, she would be the first to say leave other people's family matters alone, but the Warners' business had become her business, firstly because of Hannah and secondly because of Tom. Tom and Jessie. 'Anyway, I'm not interfering, if that's what's worrying you,' she went on. 'Rose asked me to have a word with Gerta and that's all I'm going to do, have a word. Something I should have done a while back but as it's turned out, the timing would have been wrong. Jack Blake's ship came in first thing this morning and Tom's arranged to pick him up from his hotel this evening, to take him to Rose's house.'

'So why go to Gerta's?'

'Needs be, and I owe it to Rose. Once today is over, Charlie, I'll be able to wash my hands of it and we can concentrate on putting on a nice wedding reception here.' That was her trump card. Charlie couldn't wait to have all his friends round and the neighbours in for a good old knees-up. 'I do feel sorry for poor Jack though.'

'Poor? I doubt it,' said Charlie, his nose still in his paper, as if it held more interest than what was going on in his own back yard. 'He's probably made himself a fortune out there.'

'Selling encyclopaedias? Fat chance of that.'

'Don't you be so sure, Em. How else d'yer think he can afford to come all this way? I might 'ave a word with 'im once he's sorted out his commitments. Wouldn't mind emigrating myself. I bet the rents out there are a damn sight cheaper than they are in this country.'

He had played right into her hands over another bone of contention and she was quick to take advantage. 'Very true, Charlie,' she said earnestly, 'which is all the more reason why we should think seriously of taking that loan from Johnnie's bank to buy one of them houses. We could afford to pay it back between the two of us, and we wouldn't have rent to pay then, would we?'

Hoping that Charlie's sudden silence meant that he was thinking about it, she kept quiet and waited. Tom had almost talked the subject to death, going on and on about it since the day he visited the houses and had shaken hands on a very good deal if the four went at once. Johnnie the entrepreneur was going to pay cash for his one and take a loan for another, and Tom had already marked one for himself and Jessie. So that left one and Emmie wanted it for Charlie, herself and young Stanley.

'I'd rather go to New Zealand,' said Charlie. 'Johnnie should give us the money to go, see us safely over there, out of England when the war's on. If you was thinking straight,

Emmie, you'd want the same.' He shook his head despairingly. 'Getting in debt to buy a bloody 'ouse that's gonna get blown to smithereens. Fucking stupid.'

'Don't swear, Charlie. Now that young Jessie's coming into the family you're gonna have to give it up. If you swore in front of her mother, Rose, I would die. You know how strait-laced she is.'

'Well, don't blame me if it all goes wrong, that's all,' he said. 'Just remember that I was against it and all for going across the world and away from the bombs. Just you remember that.'

Emmie felt her heart lurch. Whether Charlie knew it or not, he had just agreed to the bank loan and house purchase. She would have to be very careful and go along with his game-playing.

'The day you get off your arse, Charlie Smith, to go anywhere further than Southend is the day I'll sing for my supper.'

'Now who's swearing.' He flicked another page of his paper. 'And as for your singing, you'd do better to say your prayers and ask Him where the money's coming from for this wedding, 'cos if you think it's gonna be a ham sandwich and trifle do, you're wrong. We're doing it properly and not on a bloody shoestring.'

Happier by the minute, Emmie forced back her laughter and kept a straight face. She wanted to be on her way but she would have to bide her time, let him think he was the boss for a bit longer. To have him on her side was a good deal better than having to live with his sulks, which had been known to go on for weeks sometimes. She still hadn't won him round over her visit to Gerta.

'England beats anywhere abroad any day,' said Emmie, knowing full well that that was Charlie's true sentiment; he was a King and Country man. Mention England and he almost stood up to sing the national anthem. 'Oh, yes,' she continued, 'England's a good place, so long as you know how to work

with the system to make ends meet and pinch whatever else is needed to lighten the load.'

'Work with the system? Ha. Go and talk to all the bleeding foreigners, they'll tell you how to do that. Pouring in from every corner of the bloody world to take our jobs and 'ouses.'

'You're beginning to sound like Mosley, Charlie.'

'Give over, woman. That pompous bastard? A lot of good his claptrap's done. The man wants to try doing a full day's work. I'll have kippers for tea.' Charlie's tone made it clear that there was to be no more talk on that particular subject. 'Nice pair of kippers today instead of for Sunday breakfast.'

'So you will think about that house then? I've got my heart set on it, Charlie, a place of our own, something to leave to our grandchildren and a fresh start for us – a lovely new house.'

'New? You must be joking. It'll want a lot of bloody work done on it before it'll look halfway decent – God knows how many gallons of paint and rolls of wallpaper. Well, go on then. Sod off round to Gerta's, give me five minutes' peace.'

'What about your kippers?' she whispered, as she kissed his cheek.

'I'll have 'em when you get back, so don't be long. Tom's fetching Hannah back 'ere after the dog stadium, which should be in about an hour if I'm right . . .'

'Then he'll pick up Jack from his little hotel in Aldgate and take him round Rose's place, but not before I get there with Hannah, right, Charlie?'

'Yeah, all right, I've got it. But what if I can't keep Hannah 'ere? What if she wants to go home, and walks in on you and Gerta going at it hammer and tong . . .'

'That mustn't happen,' said Emmie quickly.

'Exactly. Which is why Rose and Jack are the ones who should handle this.'

'Well, you'll find a way to keep her 'ere for me, won't you, Charlie? We don't want to mess things up now.'

There was a rustle of newspaper and a grunt from Charlie.

'Good. That's that settled then,' said Emmie. She checked her face in the mirror above the fireplace and reached for her lipstick and powder, she didn't want Gerta to think she was going to seed.'

'Don't let the German get the better of you,' said Charlie, as she headed for the door.

Smiling to herself, Emmie left the house. You're a funny chap, Charlie Smith, she told herself. Never show your true feelings. You're just as worried about Hannah as I am but you'd never let on.

Emmie knocked three times, on Gerta's front door, the copper's knock, as it was known in the East End. Three sharp raps. She could see then why they did it, there was a ring of authority and no-nonsense about it.

'Yes? What can I do for you?' Gerta peered from a crack between the door and the wall.

Giving the door a nudge Emmie wedged her foot between it and the door frame. 'I could tell you what I want right here if you like, Gerta, but the neighbours would have a field day because I don't intend to keep my voice down. It's up to you. Ask me in or let the world hear about your private, sordid business. Rose Warner has been to see [redacted].'

She shrugged. 'You'd better come off the street before my neighbours think you've escaped from an asylum.' She stood to one side and jerked her head for Emmie to enter.

'This staircase could do with brightening up,' said Emmie, goading her. 'A pot of paint doesn't cost much. All these dark shades of paint and varnish . . .'

'I don't bother with fashions. Why pay good money just to make other people feel better? Besides, I don't encourage visitors and this is good enough for me.'

'And Hannah?'

'Hannah? Ha! She's plainer than anyone. She would be happy living in a cell in a convent.'

'Yes,' said Emmie, 'compared to living with someone like you I should think that would be an attraction.'

Gerta showed her into the sitting room and nodded towards the chair in which she was to sit – a tall-backed wooden chair. Emmie sat down on the sofa instead. 'I'll come straight to the point, Gerta, since neither of us wants to be in the other's company for longer than necessary. Rose has come clean with the girls and let them know that Hannah is not your daughter but Rose's.'

Gerta snorted in disbelief. 'That woman would die rather than let the scandalous truth come out. What would people think of her, giving away a baby? Separating twins. You are more foolish than I thought if you believe that Rose Warner has the guts to tell the truth.'

'So wheels have been set in motion,' said Emmie, 'and steps taken to ensure you don't get a penny of Hannah's share of the compensation.'

'You may set whatever you want in motion. The authorities will take my side. I have kept the unwanted child all these years, loving and caring for her, as a blood mother might. It was hard for me, since my own husband left, and I am entitled—'

'You won't get one penny, Gerta. I wrote to Jack and he tells me he divorced you. You kept that one close to your chest, didn't you?' Emmie was feeling very much on top of things. 'He's with Rose and his family right now.' He wasn't, but Gerta wasn't to know that, and he would be with them soon. 'He's coming to see you, tomorrow, to ask about the money he's been sending Hannah, which she hasn't seen a penny of.'

The colour had drained from Gerta's face, Emmie noted with satisfaction, and she seemed dumbstruck. But not for long.

'I spit on you,' she hissed. 'I spit on the Warner family and I spit on Jack Blake. I spit—'

'Spit where you like,' Emmie cut in. 'It doesn't change anything.'

'And soon my homeland will spit bombs all over your precious England. Hitler will take this country. Then he will clean it of *all* degenerates. Britain will become his domain, Emmie Smith, and people like you and Jack Blake will be swept into the gutter.'

'I don't think so, Gerta.' Emmie wished Charlie was here, he would be roaring with laughter by now. 'The British are stronger than you think, my dear. Hitler won't stand a chance against us British, trust in that.'

'This country is not prepared for another war. It is asleep,' Gerta sneered.

'Cat-napping, Gerta, cat-napping, and whether you believe it or not, most of us can read the newspapers and listen to the news on the wireless. It would seem that your favourite cause is on the wane.'

'Really?' said Gerta spitefully. 'And how will your sons cope with that?'

'Find another social club to join, because that's all they're in it for, Gerta. The free women and the tea dances. Not many take it quiet as seriously as you do, my dear. There are Blackshirts and there are Blackshirts.'

'Oh,' said Gerta, deflated. 'So you know. You surprise me.'

'We don't believe in secrets between family, which is why Hannah is being told the truth. I've stepped in now and there's no getting rid of me. You see, my son is going to marry Jessie Warner, Hannah's twin, so it really is my business now. Don't test me on this one, Gerta. Don't even think about bringing my sons down with your vicious tongue because if you do, I'll make you wish you'd never left Germany.'

Gerta stood up abruptly and asked Emmie to leave. 'Please pass on a message to your friend. Tell her that I will settle for less than I asked but I will not settle for nothing.'

'I'll do that with pleasure. I'm sure she'll be ready to make

a small settlement ... for your troubles. She's not a greedy woman.' And with that, Emmie swept out.

At home, Emmie found Hannah in the best room enjoying a cup of tea with Charlie. The next step was to get themselves to Rose's house, before Tom arrived there with Jack. The plan was well laid but it could still go wrong.

'Charlie's been telling me about his time in the trenches during the war, Emmie. It's such a good story. What heroes he and all the other soldiers were.' There was a knowing smile on Hannah's face; she had heard the story many times and Emmie knew it.

'Well, up you get, Hannah. We've a visit to make.'

'A visit? To where?'

'It's a surprise, now be a good gurl and don't spoil it for me. Come on, I may have found you a nice room with a good family.'

'A room? With a family? But I was thinking about a flat, a small place of my own.'

'I know, but you haven't found anything you like after all this time and I think this would suit you nicely. It's only a fifteen-minute walk or so, and it's a lovely evening. At least come and see it, Hannah. I've gone to a lot of trouble.'

'Well, I suppose there's no harm in looking ...'

'Course there ain't, gal,' said Charlie, his timing perfect. 'If Em's given it the thumbs-up, it can't be bad. Go on, the pair of you, and don't take too long about it. The boys'll be in soon and I'm blowed if I'm gonna start frying kippers for that lot.'

Hannah was quieter than usual as they walked through the back streets, listening more than talking. Emmie thought she had probably picked up that something was afoot, but Hannah asked no questions. What she was thinking was anyone's guess. As far as Emmie was concerned, once she'd delivered her into Rose's hands, her job was done and she would slip away.

When they turned into Rose's street, Emmie began to panic a little. How would Hannah react to suddenly finding out the truth and being thrust into the Warner family? Her insides fluttered with worry, but there was no turning back now.

'The family you're about to meet are not exactly strangers, Hannah,' she said as they reached the front door. 'This is Jessie's home. She'll be waiting to welcome you.'

'Jessie? Jessie lives here?'

'That's right. Jessie, her mother, her sister Dolly, and their two young brothers, Alfie and Stephen.' Saying no more, Emmie knocked on the door.

Hannah craned her neck. 'I can see there are attic rooms. Are they the ones to let?' Now she was smiling.

'Let's wait and see, shall we?'

It was Rose who answered the door, looking apprehensive. 'Hello, Emmie,' she said, and then turned to Hannah. 'You look in fine fettle, Hannah. Come in.'

Ignoring Hannah's quizzical look, Emmie motioned for her to go first and she did, without a word.

Jessie appeared in the hall and stood looking at her twin, not moving a muscle, hardly breathing. It all seemed to fit, the way she looked, the way they had got on when they first met. Walking slowly towards her, Jessie's instincts were to go against all that she'd been told to do, which was to stay passive. Excitement rose within her and she just wanted to lead Hannah away from everyone else and hold her tight. She gripped her arm instead and brushed a kiss across her cheek, whispering, 'Hello, Hannah. You're in for a surprise.'

Hannah looked over Jessie's shoulder at Emmie, her eyes full of questions. Jessie was still clinging to her and Hannah had the strange feeling that she was smelling her skin.

'That's enough now, Jessie,' said Rose quietly. 'You'll frighten her off.'

'Into the sitting room, is it, Rose?' prompted Emmie. Now that it came to it, she found she couldn't just slip away as she'd

intended. She had to see this thing through, she had to be there for Hannah.

'Yes. Dolly's waiting to welcome you too, Hannah. The boys are upstairs, we'll call them down once we've explained a few things.'

'I don't want to sound ungrateful,' Hannah was at a loss for words, 'but this is all a bit overwhelming. I don't understand.'

'I'm sure,' said Rose, guiding her in, 'but everything will become clear.' Rose sat down on the sofa and patted the space next to her. 'Come and sit down.'

Hannah did as Rose asked, looking very uncomfortable. Jessie and Emmie sat on chairs. Dolly was in the armchair.

'Now . . .' said Rose, 'this is all going to come as a shock to you and once I've said what I've got to say, you'll no doubt wonder why I've left it so long to tell you.'

Hannah looked to Emmie for some sort explanation, but Emmie just nodded encouragingly.

'Has something happened to Tom?' she finally asked.

That one small question touched Emmie to the core, Hannah's thoughts had gone straight to her Tom.

'Tom's fine, Hannah,' she said. 'In fact, he'll be here shortly.'

Another silence followed. This time it was Dolly who stepped in.

'You're not gonna believe this, Hannah,' she said, leaning back, arms folded, 'but all that you said that day at Tom's house about you and Jessie thinking the same thing and at the same time – well, you would wouldn't you, being twins.'

The room went still, no one seemed to breathe even.

Hannah stared at Dolly. 'Say that again?'

'I know.' Dolly grinned. 'I was shocked as well when they told me. Mum and Dad had you adopted 'cos they couldn't afford to feed two babies. We're your family and we want you to come and live with us. We've got some catching up

to do.' Dolly was the only one smiling. 'They picked a right one, though, didn't they, with that bleeding German woman. From what I've heard of it, she's a bit of a loony.'

'That's enough, Dolly.' said Rose, secretly grateful for her daughter's straightforward manner. She took Hannah's hand and squeezed it. 'Dolly certainly doesn't beat about the bush, does she?'

'What did she mean? I'm nobody's twin. I don't have any brothers or sisters.' Again Hannah turned to Emmie. 'Why are they doing this? Is it some kind of a parlour game?'

Emmie, who knew her better than anyone, realised that Hannah was waiting for a simple explanation. She wasn't shocked, she wasn't upset; she was slightly indignant, that was all. Rose was going to have to open up and stop beating about the bush herself soon, before Hannah got totally confused.

'I'm sure Dolly didn't mean what she said about your foster mother, Hannah,' said Emmie, giving Rose a sharp look to prod her into speech; this was her job, after all. 'Gerta might have her strange ways but she's hardly a loony.'

'Foster mother? You mean this is serious? You think I'm Jessie's twin sister?'

Rose laid a hand on Hannah's shoulder and squeezed it. 'I know you are, my dear. It pains me to think about it, but I let Jack and his wife Gerta have one of my babies to bring up as their own. At the time, Robert and I were very, very poor and didn't have enough money to look after you, but they did, and they wanted you very much.'

'She took me in,' murmured Hannah, her eyes now fixed on the floor, 'when my own mother turned me out . . . is that what you're saying? If so . . . that means a great deal, doesn't it?' Again she looked to Emmie for answers. 'She saved me from Dr Barnardo's . . . from going into a children's home.'

'No, Hannah!' Startling everyone, Rose stood up. 'She did no such thing. I would *never* have placed you in a home. Gerta was my sister-in-law. I trusted her. She and my brother begged

me to let them have one of my girls. I didn't want to give you up, of *course* I didn't! But we were living in one room which only just had a roof. We thought it was the best thing all round, and so it was, at the time. My brother loved you like a father would love his own child.' A strangled cry escaped from Rose. 'He cherished you.'

'So my father is not my father, he's ... my uncle? Is that what you're saying? And when he tired of me, he left me there ... with her?'

There was a heavy silence, and once again it was Dolly who broke it

'That's all over now,' she said brightly. 'You can live here with us. I think you look more like me than Jessie – except for the blonde hair.'

Hannah looked across at Jessie but did not return her twin's weak smile. 'How long have you know about this?'

'Not long. I wanted to come straight round to tell you but I was told I had to wait until now. Mind you,' she said, her cheeks flushed, 'I think I've always known something. It was as if I missed you without knowing who you were. I know that sounds daft but—'

'It doesn't. I've lived with that feeling too and it made me feel very lonely, I would rather not have had it. I know I was once very close to someone ... someone who wasn't there any more.' She turned to Rose, still no smile to light up her pretty face. 'How old was I when you did this thing?'

'Almost a year old,' said Rose, her voice heavy with [redacted]

'So we would remember something, of course we would. No doubt we shared the same pram and the same cot.'

'Yes,' Rose managed to smile through her tears, 'you did.'

'Well,' said Hannah, 'I feel very sorry for myself as that baby. I think it was a cruel thing to do to a baby. I don't think that my mother, Gerta, is the wickedest one of all.'

She stood up, tall and erect, rendering them all speechless. 'If you will excuse me, I think it's time I left. Don't bother to show me out, and Emmie, don't bother to walk me home. I'd prefer to be alone.' She looked from Dolly to Rose and then to Jessie. 'And as for welcoming me into your home, I'm afraid it's too late for that. I don't belong in this family. I don't have any brothers or sisters and you are not my mother!'

This was more than Emmie could take. She stood up and faced Hannah. 'You just stay right where you are, Hannah! How *can* you condemn Rose out of hand like this? You have no idea what she has been through! You owe your mother an apology!'

'*Apology*?' Hannah's anger was frightening. Emmie hadn't bargained for this. 'I'm not bloody *apologising* for what *she* did to *me*!

'Calm down, Hannah,' said Emmie. 'Listen to what—'

'No! I've heard *enough*. Who do they think they *are*?' She turned on all of them. 'You lure me here under false pretences and then tell me that I am one of you! Strangers! That's what you are to me, *strangers*! So prim and *proper*, living in your nice big house with this fine furniture. One big happy family. You shun me for nearly eighteen years and then expect me to come smiling and grateful? Well, I don't want to be one of you. I hate the sight of everyone in this room! You can go to bloody hell! *All of you!*'

The knock on the front door was a relief; Tom had timed it perfectly.

'Do you want to tell Hannah who's at the door, Rose, or shall I?' asked Emmie.

Rose, pale and drawn, shook her head. 'I'll tell her myself, then I'll go to my bedroom. Don't be so hard on my brother, Hannah. He's come a very long way to help you through this.'

'What did you say?' Hannah's voice and expression changed

instantly. Her face and neck became taut and her soft blue eyes filled with tears. 'My father . . . is *here*? At the door?'

'Yes,' said Rose, 'he's here. I'll leave you to your reunion. I'll be in my room if I'm wanted.' A broken woman, Rose was grateful for Jessie and Dolly either side of her.

'It'll be all right, Mum,' whispered Dolly.

'It was shock, that's all,' added Jessie as they went upstairs together.

Downstairs, Emmie wearily pulled herself to her feet. 'Well, I suppose I'd better open the door. Tom can walk me home. We'll leave you alone with your father, Hannah.'

'No, Emmie! No! Please don't leave me. Please, Emmie! I'm sorry for what I said! I'm sorry, Emmie! Don't go! He might hate me too!'

'Hate you? You think they asked you here because they hate you? Is that what you think?'

'Well, perhaps not, but they do now. Stay with me!'

'All right, Hannah. I'll stay with you.'

She opened the street door.

'Hello, Emmie,' smiled Jack. 'It's good to see you again.'

Emmie did her best to return his smile. He looked older, his face lined and tanned, his hair sprinkled with grey, but he was still handsome Jack Blake. 'Hannah's in the parlour, Jack. I'm afraid it's all gone badly wrong. Maybe you can talk to her. Rose is too upset to see you, she's in her room and no doubt crying her eyes out.' She looked from him to Tom and he did exactly what any mother would want her son to do, he put his arms round her and held her close, shushing her and telling her not to be upset.

'Did you really expect Hannah to fall into their arms?' he said gently. 'I suppose she shouted the odds.'

'She was a very wicked girl, Tom. The things she said to poor Rose, and in front of those girls. I blush at the thought of it. I wish I'd let you have your way. She wouldn't have behaved like that if you'd been here. I'm sure of it.' She looked at Jack.

'Oh Jack, I am sorry. I thought it was going to be so lovely. It's what I've always dreamed might happen and it all went wrong. What *have* I done?'

Jack touched her arm comfortingly. 'Started the ball rolling, my friend. We've a long way to go but look how far we've come. Now you go on upstairs to comfort my sister, and Tom, you go and see to your sweetheart. I want to see my Hannah alone. I've waited a very long time for this moment.'

Jack went into the sitting room and closed the door behind him. He gazed at Hannah for a moment and then held out his arms to her. 'Come here, sweetheart. Come and give your old dad a hug.'

Crying, Hannah fell into his arms. 'I've missed you,' she said. 'I missed you so much it hurt.'

'I know, I know.' He stroked her lovely soft hair. 'I'm here now and I promise I'll never leave you again. Never.'

'But you'll have to go back surely,' she said, her head buried in his shoulder. 'How can you stay in England?'

'Very easily, my pet,' he said. 'I have no intention of going back. This is the day I've been saving for.' He pulled himself away from her and looked into her face. 'Now then, I know you've had a shock. A real shock. But there is more, sweetheart, and I think it's right that we get it all out of the way now. It's to do with your mother.'

'Which one?'

'Gerta.'

'I want you to know before the others, and if you don't want to tell the others, we won't. I think we should sit down.'

Jack explained briefly that Gerta wasn't all she seemed. Her role as an ardent Blackshirt was a clever double-edged cover for the fact that she was a German agent, a spy, who had been under surveillance for quite a while. He told Hannah that Gerta had insisted she get a position in the local library because the books that she brought

to and fro contained coded information for another agent to collect.

The fact that Gerta was an agent did not shock Hannah; on the contrary, it came as no surprise. If anything, it threw light on things she had often found puzzling. 'But how could you know all this?' she asked, sitting closely by Jack's side on the sofa. 'I feel as if I'll wake up soon and find myself in that room, with her reading into the small hours, if reading is what she was doing. She doesn't look like a spy.'

'Agents are usually very ordinary-looking people who don't draw attention to themselves. Gerta, in her own way, was an ordinary German, living in England, who loved the Fuhrer.'

'Why are you telling me now? Because they're going to arrest her?'

'Yes. So you must come and stay with me in the hotel or stay here with . . . with your family. You mustn't go back to the flat for a few days. Then we can return to collect your things.'

Hannah let out a low whistle. 'I can't believe all this is happening. Does Tom know about it?'

'No. But I will have a word with him in private. He and his brother have got to stop attending meetings and burn any evidence of a uniform or anything to do with the Fascist movement. It's very possible that there will be a war, Hannah. If there is, Oswald Mosley and his officers will be interned.'

'Well,' said Hannah, all self-pity gone, 'what will I find out next? Maybe they'll want to arrest me?' She looked at Jack, suddenly frightened. 'Will they?' Her hand flew to her chest as the implications sank in. 'I was passing messages in the library books I took out. Why haven't they interrogated me?'

'No need, Hannah,' he said, quietly laughing at her. 'You've been under surveillance too, and they checked you out, believe me, right down to the rubbish you throw away in the dustbin.'

'But how do you *know* all this?'

'I just do. Don't ask questions I can't answer. Just accept it, Hannah, if you can. It will take strength—'

'Oh, I think I've got that. I've had to have it. It was only the thought of you coming back for me one day that kept me going at times. You, Tom and Emmie, and dear, lovable, Charlie.'

'Shall we ask my sister Rose to come downstairs now?'

'Is she really my mother? And Jessie my twin sister?'

'Yes, Hannah, she really is. Now I suggest that we don't say a word this evening about Gerta and what's about to happen to her. There won't be a fuss, nothing in the papers about her in particular – several agents will be arrested over the next few days in and around London. My arrival in England today and not last week or next week was deliberate. I wanted to be here when it happened and I wanted you out of the flat when they took her.'

The waiting seemed like an age to Jessie as she sat with Tom and Dolly in their bedroom. She went into Rose's room to ask if it was time yet for them to go down and was pleased to see that her mother looked better for having had a chat with her close friend, Emmie.

'I should think we're all ready for a good strong cup of tea,' said Rose, smiling at Jessie. 'It's been a long day and it's not over yet.'

'I'll go and tell Dolly, Tom and the boys to come down, shall I?'

'Yes, I should think they've had enough time together now. Let's hope he's managed to bring Hannah around.'

When they all went back into the sitting room, Jessie pushed the boys in ahead of her. She thought they would be enough to bring a smile to Hannah's face if she was still upset.

'Well,' said Emmie when they were all settled and it was clear that Hannah was more like her old self, 'now that we're in the one room together, I would like to say something. Getting

everyone together like this, and giving poor Hannah not one shock of her life but two was *my* idea. I was prepared to take full blame if it had all gone wrong, as it looked as if it had at one point, but since all seems fairly well, I'll take the credit instead.' Emmie's smile was broad. She focused on Alfie who was yawning. 'So if you don't mind, I'd like a little thanks. Well, Alfie?'

'What you looking at me for?'

'You're the eldest son, head of the family.'

His expression changed instantly. 'Oh, yeah ... well, I suppose I am. Um ... thanks very much ... from all of us.' Alfie looked across at Dolly and flapped his hand. 'Pour out the tea now, will you, Dolly?'

'Cheeky bugger.'

'Will you be moving in then, Hannah?' asked Stephen, a touch nervous.

'No. I won't be moving in. It was very nice to be asked, but I'm going ahead with plans I had already made.' She looked at Jack and smiled. 'My father isn't going back to New Zealand.'

'Is that right, Jack?' Rose's face lit up.

'Yes it is. When I received Emmie's letter, I decided then that England was where I belonged and, well, what with one thing and another, the time was right. So I asked for a transfer to London and the head of department agreed. I bought a one-way ticket.'

'Well, I'm very very pleased to hear it,' said Rose. 'If you should ever want to take up my eldest son's offer, I would love to have you here. We all would. I'm sure our tenants would understand, provided we give them fair notice to leave.'

'It's a lovely offer,' said Jack, 'but one I won't take up. No disrespect. It's just that I'm not really cut out to live in attics, although I'm sure it's a great flat.' He glanced at Hannah and smiled. 'I'm happy to stay in the small hotel with my daughter and look for a nice comfortable house which suits us both.'

'In the East End?' asked Rose hopefully.

'No, my dear, I'm too used to space around me now. Epping Forest perhaps.' He checked his wristwatch, 'We should be leaving soon, Hannah. I want to pay a visit to my mother and my brothers, who you may or may not remember.'

'I don't,' said Hannah, 'not really.'

Jack's easy manner had banished all shyness from the boys and before he could leave he had to answer all their questions about his life in the bush. Dolly and Hannah took their tea to a corner of the room and sat on the low stool, chatting. Emmie and Rose sat quietly, sipping their tea, too tired to talk.

'Come on, Jess,' whispered Tom. 'Let's get out of here.'

'I'll just say goodbye to Hannah in case they've gone by the time we get back.' Weaving her way round chairs and the table, Jessie touched her twin's elbow. 'I'm just going out for a walk with Tom. You will come and see me soon, won't you?'

'What about tomorrow? I don't think I'll be going into the library,' she said. 'I'll be taking a week off – Dad said it would be good to do that.'

Jessie kissed her on the cheek, squeezed her arm and whispered, 'I'm really pleased we've found out about each other.'

Outside in the street, Jessie and Tom put their arms round each other and strolled along, happy to be alone. They talked about Hannah, Jack, and their own future. Rose had listened when Jessie told her about the house she and Tom wanted to buy and after hearing all the details, she agreed to let Jessie use her part of the compensation money to buy it.

When Jessie talked about the baby, Tom became thoughtful. 'Jess, I've got something to ask you. I want an honest answer because it's your future, our future . . . or maybe just yours . . . that we're planning.'

His serious tone worried her and she wondered if he was about to suggest something horrible. 'Go on then, Tom, get if off your chest.'

'I know you bumped into Max the other day,' he said,

'Dolly mentioned it. And I know you're bound to bump into him again, so I want you to be absolutely sure that it is me you want as your husband and not Max. It's best you say now, Jessie, to save messing up both our lives – and his.'

'Of course it's you I want to marry. You know I love you, and in case you've forgotten it's your baby I'm having, not Max's. I've not been seeing him while I've been seeing you, if that's what you think. Is that what you think?'

'Oh, thank Christ for that.'

She couldn't believe her ears. 'You mean you *did* think the baby might be Max's? Surely not. You wouldn't think I'd trick you over something that important?'

'No, of course not, silly. I just thought you might want a back door to slip through, that's all. I was just checking, in case you were still in love with Max ... and felt stuck with me.'

'Well, now you know. I've never been this happy, so don't spoil it. I loved you before I even knew that you'd been looking after my twin for me.' She picked a small wild rose from a hedge growing in a neighbour's front garden and pushed it into the buttonhole in his jacket. 'I don't want anything to change ... ever.'

He cupped her face and kissed her lightly on the mouth. 'You'll be all right now, Jess. You've got me to look after you.' He slipped his arm round her waist and they walked on, passing a newspaper seller. He was shouting to draw attention to his placard which read: 'Advice from Minister of Defence, *"JOIN THE TERRITORIAL ARMY – BE PREPARED FOR A SECOND WORLD WAR!"*'

'Warmongers,' said Tom, smiling. 'What they'll do to sell a newspaper.'

'I hope you're right. Some are saying that they'll be calling men up before next summer. They wouldn't do that if they weren't expecting a war, would they?'

'Stop *worrying*. Everything's on the up. Anyway, our baby's due in April. Wild horses wouldn't drag me away from my

family, neither king nor country will take me away from my Jessie and my baby girl.'

'How come you're so sure it's a girl?'

'I just know. Don't ask me how. I just do. I can see her now, long white hair, running towards her daddy, arms outstretched. My daughter. My little Emma-Rose.'

'Oh, so you've chosen a name already, have you? Don't I get a say in it?'

'You can pick the name if it's a boy.'

'Fair enough.' That suited Jessie; she couldn't lose either way, Emma-Rose was perfect.

'In April nineteen thirty-nine I'll be the proudest father of the most beautiful baby girl, you'll see.'

'And our little family of three will be living in Grant Street.'

'In our little two up, two down. So no more talk of me going off to fight the Germans. It's not gonna happen. Trust me. There won't be a World War Two.'

That night, before turning off her bedside lamp, Jessie wrote in her notebook: '13 August 1938 – Our Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, is to visit Hitler for a crisis talk. It's more frightening than the *The War of the Worlds* on the wireless. Mum's secretly looking forward to being a grandmother. Tom says there won't be a war. Hannah has been told she's my twin and I think – I hope – she's pleased.'

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Chapter One

On a sunny September morning in 1938, a group of workmen turned up in Bethnal Green Gardens and started to dig trenches. There was such an air of high spirits and so many onlookers that the mood was more comparable to children playing with their spades and buckets at a seaside beach than to preparations for the potential horrors of war. The gravity of the situation soon became clear when just a few days later the fitting and issuing of gas masks began.

Cupping her hands round her warm drink in her tiny living room, Jessie Smith, although tired and looking the worse for wear, was at least thankful that at last her six-month-old son Billy was sleeping soundly after a fretful night of teething trouble. Like most people in Britain, she and her twin sister Hannah, who was on a one-day home leave, were waiting to hear what the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had to say. In their hearts each of them knew what was coming and the room seemed to have filled with doom and gloom even though in their own way they had been willing the news not to be bad. They had deliberately avoided any talk of what might be and fantasised instead about the type of house that Hannah might one day live in should she end up married to the wealthy but boring man who had set his sights on her at Station X.

'The trouble is,' said Hannah, 'there only seem to be two types of men, rich and boring or poor and interesting.'

Jessie found it strange that her twin had not mentioned qualities which she would have named – magnetic, exciting, irresistible. 'What about my Tom? Where does he fit into your ideas about men?'

'A bastard but you can't help loving him?'

Quietly laughing at her sister's honesty, Jessie had to agree. 'Especially when he's been on a drinking binge with 'is dad and brothers.'

'Ah,' said Hannah, all-knowing. 'I remember those nights out. They were always getting up to some kind of no good, sailing on the wrong side of the law. Emmie used to wait for them with a rolling pin. She really did. And she hit them with it too. Across the bottom. She would tell me about it the next day, with a crafty smile on her face. "They pulled it off, love," she would whisper, slipping me a pound note. I hardly knew whether to take it or not.'

Recoiling from Hannah's familiarity towards Tom and his family, Jessie tried to rise above her jealousy. Her sister had, after all, known Tom for years before she herself had ever spoken to him. 'He never tells me where he gets the money to drink,' she said. 'He just winks. I don't need to know more.'

'Of course,' said Hannah, laughing. 'Another parcel falls off the back of a lorry at the dock gates and he and his dad and brothers go on the town to celebrate.'

Their diversion from reality ended when from the wireless came a hushed silence broken only by a quiet crackling. The stillness seemed deliberate, as if the BBC was preparing listeners for the worst kind of news. It was 3 September 1939.

With a ghastly dread in her stomach, Jessie quietly prayed that the country's biggest fear had not been realised. Head bowed and wishing that Tom, her husband of one year, was there by her side, she listened earnestly to Chamberlain's slow and grave delivery.

I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room, 10 Downing Street. This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government the final note, stating that unless he heard from them by eleven o'clock, and they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.

Stricken by the announcement, Jessie switched off the wireless. Her mind went back to a dark day in the spring of this year, in April, two weeks before Billy was due. Tom had received his call-up papers ordering him to report to the Tower of London where he would be conscripted into the army. They had been married for just six months at the time. Until that morning post had arrived, Jessie believed that nothing could spoil her and Tom's perfect world.

'I can't say I'm all that shocked,' murmured Hannah. 'This war was on the cards.'

'I s'pose so,' replied Jessie, half wishing her twin wasn't there right then and saying such things. It made it too real too soon.

'Life is about to change, Jessie. For all of us. No more thinking the best.'

'I know. I think it hit me really when Tom's call-up papers came in April. I shook like a leaf. Couldn't stop. That poor bloody postman. I feel sorry for 'im now. He was only doing his job but he must've sensed the resentment us wives and mothers felt when he delivered them brown envelopes. Poor sod. You should 'ave seen the look on 'is face.' Jessie covered her face with her hands. She wanted Hannah to go. To explain why would be impossible. She and her twin were very close but for some strange reason she needed to be alone right now. Wanted to be by herself to think for herself.

'Thank God for Tom's mum next door. Good old Emmie,'

she said finally, trying her best. 'I expect she'll be listening in with the other women at work. Three sons to go to war. I don't know what's worse, seeing your husband go off and wondering if you'll ever see 'im again, or watching three sons walk away.'

'Well, aren't you the light at the end of a dark tunnel,' said Hannah, smiling, trying to lift her sister's spirits. 'We Brits have more backbone than that, Jessie. And Emmie's got guts for two strong women. And as for Hitler, let him try to take England. Just let him try.'

'Britain,' said Jessie. 'He won't settle for less.'

'Well then, he's in for a surprise, isn't he?'

'Let's hope so.'

'Oh, you can take it from me. If—'

'Hannah, please! I don't want to talk about it.' Jessie's tone was anguished. She glanced across the room at Billy and sighed. 'I don't really want to talk about anything. It's all too much for me.'

'Sorry, Jess. I wasn't thinking.'

With Billy asleep and the wireless switched off, the only sound in that room was the ticking of the clock and the hissing of the fire. Staring into the glowing coals, Jessie glanced at the wedding photograph of her and Tom on the mantel shelf, radiant and in love. Next to it was a group wedding picture showing her mother standing proudly between Jessie and Hannah, and their sister Dolly, with her younger brothers, Stephen, in his Boy Scout uniform, and Alfie in his very first suit. The smile on their mother Rose's face hid the disappointment she had felt. There had been no white satin lace dress for her daughter, no bridesmaids and, worst of all, Jessie had been carrying Tom's child when she went to the altar.

But Jessie had made a beautiful bride and looked radiant in her oyster satin coat with tiny coloured glass buttons and matching skirt, which now hung in the wardrobe upstairs,

waiting for another occasion when she might have the chance to wear it.

Jessie couldn't blame her mother for being cheerless at her wedding; she did, after all, have to stand alone to see her daughter married, without her late husband by her side. It had pained Jessie that her dad had not been there on her special day. She knew that her mother had not really taken to Tom and, well-mannered though she was, Rose hadn't been able to hide her feelings. His easy-go-lucky approach to life worried her.

Rose had made her views known to Jessie about her son-in-law's attitude towards the possibility of war. In her opinion, he liked the idea of being paid to train as a soldier, with board and lodging provided, while Jessie received an army pension. Jessie told her mother she was wrong and that once she got to know Tom properly she would realise he had been innocently baiting her. Rose had not been convinced.

Before his conscription in April, Tom had given up his job at the docks and taken an offer of freelance work as painter and decorator, which Rose considered reckless of him. The work had been spasmodic and he and Jessie, during those late winter months, had struggled to make ends meet.

Hannah pushed Chamberlain's speech from her mind and went into the kitchen to make them both a cup of tea while Jessie enjoyed the memory of one particular weekend when Tom had been home on leave. Standing by the butler sink, stringing some runner beans, she had been admiring the bluey-pink hydrangea bush in the garden when Tom had crept into the house and sneaked up behind her, giving her the biggest surprise of her life. It was little things like that that kept their love burning. During his periods of leave from the army, they had spent much of the time making love or fussing over their baby, Billy. On that leave Tom had seemed more worried than usual. He'd dropped hints about her being in London with all the French sailors on the lookout for a bit of romance.

'Actually they're called matelots,' she'd said innocently and in fun. It hadn't gone down well. Tom was a jealous man by nature and it was beginning to show. He had related tales he'd heard about the generosity of the French sailors who lavished presents of silk stockings, chocolates and brandy.

'Just don't go leaving our Billy and going out with 'em, that's all,' was his usual parting remark when his leave ended.

'You know,' said Hannah, coming into the room with their tea, 'Tom's very nervous about losing you.' Once again, as had happened before, the twin sisters seemed to have been thinking the same thing at the same time even though they had been in different rooms.

'What makes you say that?'

'Well,' said Hannah, sitting down, 'that time when I had a day off and came to see you when Tom was on home leave, he quizzed me on the goings-on around town.'

'Did he now?'

'It's all right. I was quick off the mark. Gave him a look that said don't even think about using me to spy on my own sister. I had, after all, come especially to tell you *my* good news.'

'That you'd been summoned for war work.'

'Yes.'

'And are you still chuffed over it, now that you're there?'

'Yep. I love my work. It's such a fantastic place. The hours are long and it's hard work, but I love being there. And you know how I enjoyed working in the library. I don't even miss being around books.'

Jessie's curiosity was piqued. 'Come on then, tell us what goes on there – or where it is at least. Don't be mean. You know I won't say anything.'

'I can't. I'm sworn to secrecy. Tom tried and failed and you know how persistent he can be,' Hannah said, smiling, hoping that would be the end of it.

'Please yourself. I just wondered what your room was like, that's all. I'm not bothered one way or the other.'

'Oh, I can tell you that. It's small but it's mine and the sun streams in through the window which looks out over the grounds. That's why I like it so much. It's heaven compared to that miserable flat over that dusty shop in Bethnal Green.'

'With a tyrant for a mother.' Jessie remembered Gerta, the woman who had made Hannah's childhood a misery.

'*Foster* mother,' Hannah corrected. 'And it's all buried in the past where it should be.'

Jessie turned the conversation back to her sister's work. 'What do you do there then? Just tell me that bit. Office work? Filing?'

'I mustn't tell you, Jess! I can't tell you what I do or where I work and live. It's secret stuff to do with the government and it was made clear that my lips must be sealed. I could get into a lot of trouble for even talking this much about it.'

The room went quiet again. Jessie didn't like the sound of it and didn't like her sister having to be away from the area, especially now. 'So now that war's been declared, will you still be able to come back now and then?'

'I hope so.' The tone of Hannah's voice made the message she was giving clear: no more talk of it. So Jessie pushed it from her mind. Very soon Emmie would be home from work and straight in to commiserate over the announcement on the wireless. They had things to discuss, that was for sure. Emmie would want to make plans straightaway, marking out every single air-raid shelter in the borough and advising Jessie to only shop close by those shelters for the sake of safety. After all, she had her grandson to think of as well as her daughter-in-law.

'I wonder how Tom's taking the news,' said Jessie, feeling worse by the minute.

'He's with men, don't forget. Soldiers. Their instincts will be to protect their territory. Knowing Tom, he'll be in a fighting mood.'

Maybe Hannah was right but on his last visit home, just a few weeks previously, Tom had still been adamant that Britain would not go to war. He had never believed that the day would come when the Prime Minister would make the announcement that Jessie had just listened to on the wireless.

'I think,' said Hannah, 'that Tom plays his cards close to his chest. All that talk about war never coming was a cover. He's not daft, Jessie. He knew.'

'Maybe.' It was becoming clear to Jessie that her twin sister knew Tom better than she did. And there was no denying that Tom knew Hannah better than all of them. But that was understandable. Jessie had only discovered the existence of her twin a year ago and Hannah had been a close friend of Tom since early schooldays. And now Jessie hardly saw anything of Hannah since she'd been posted to Buckinghamshire. What with her sister's absence and Tom having been stationed at Thetford, Jessie wanted to get out of the house sometimes and bring some fun into her life. Every other woman she knew, it seemed, was working in a factory preparing for a war and going out with friends in the evenings for a lively time. If she was honest with herself, she would have had to admit that she did sometimes feel envious. Jealous of her twin Hannah and jealous of her other sister, lively, carefree Dolly. Her own life seemed dull and lonely by comparison to theirs, even if she did have the beautiful son she adored.

'I'm going to have to go now, Jess,' said Hannah, checking the time. 'I don't want to miss my train.'

'No, you don't want to do that,' Jessie said with a touch of bitterness. They hugged and Hannah promised to come and see Jessie as soon as she could.

'It'll work out, Jess, you'll see. This time next year we'll be looking back with relief and smiling.'

Once Hannah had gone back to the centre at Bletchley Park, where enemy codes were deciphered and where Hannah's adoptive father, Jack Blake, had also been stationed months

before her, as a code breaker, Jessie felt very much alone in her two-up, two-down in Bethnal Green, which she loved. It was true that she regularly saw her in-laws who lived in the same street, and her own mother, Rose, twice a week, and sometimes her younger brother Stephen stayed overnight, but for all of that nothing filled the empty gap she felt. She missed Tom's strong arms holding her close in bed and she missed the times when she and her twin sister had sat and chatted for hours on end about everything and nothing.

Jessie's other sister Dolly, true to form, had been having a whale of a time and making the most of the pre-wartime spirit. She was always going out on dates and was very popular with the Dutch marines whose ships sometimes docked in London. The East End, it seemed, was as popular as the West End when it came to night life, the pubs and taverns full of laughter, cheerful music, and song.

On the way to the bus stop to see Tom off on his last leave home, Jessie had been mortified when he said he had thoughts of not going back. The conversation immediately changed into an argument with her telling him not to dare to do anything stupid. She told him to stick it out like the rest of the conscripts and that was when he revealed his true worry to her. He asked if she'd been seeing her old boyfriend while he was away, Max Cohen, whom she had courted for three years before meeting Tom.

The unexpected question had thrown her. Of course she hadn't been seeing Max but more importantly, why had Tom even asked? She had been faithful, unlike some other married women, and hadn't even gone out for one evening, and there he had stood, accusing her. She had refused to answer him at first, which had caused him to be even more testy. She wouldn't deny it and that, in Tom's eyes, made her look guilty. When Tom had demanded to know why she wasn't denying it, she had yelled, 'I shouldn't need to!' not caring who heard. 'Of course I haven't seen him! He's in the bloody army as well, isn't he!'

His reply had shaken her. 'No he's not! As if you didn't know! Got out of it and all because he's got two left feet. Did you know he 'ad two left feet, Jess?'

If she had not been so livid with him she would have found his remark funny. She hadn't thought about Max in a while but Tom had obviously been worrying about leaving her in London with the man she had once given herself to and said she would marry living close by. Now with the likelihood of being posted abroad, Tom would be even more anxious as to what she might be getting up to. She hadn't realised until then just how damaging jealousy could be. It had all started with a light joke from Tom but had grown and was still spreading, affecting them both for different reasons.

With Billy in her arms, awake and contented, Jessie went out into the back garden and picked a dahlia for him to play with before letting Harry out of his hutch for a run-around, which would please her son more than anything. He loved the rabbit and chuckled whenever it ran or hopped or deliberately turned its back on them. Able to crawl about now, Billy struggled to get down from Jessie's firm grip but the last thing she was going to do was let him loose in the back yard. 'You'll have to wait, Billy, till you can walk. Then you and Harry can chase each other.' From the expression on his face, she almost believed he understood every word and had a feeling that he'd do his utmost to pull himself up on to his feet when he was in the old playpen a neighbour had recently given her.

Walking around the garden, pointing out different leaves and flowers, Jessie felt as if she was in a strange kind of dream. Here she was with her adorable baby boy, her rabbit frisking around in the afternoon sun, the roses still in bloom and autumn flowers all around, and yet war had been declared. *War*. It didn't seem possible that it could happen in her country.

She recalled the day in April when Tom had been summoned into the army. It came flooding back as clear

as if it was happening right then. Jessie had wept when she saw the letter. She was in bed when Tom let himself into the house and she heard him knocking into furniture and singing, badly and out of tune, obviously very drunk.

'You were meant for me ... I was meant for you ...' he sang. 'Nature patterned you and when she was done ... Jess was all the good things rolled into one ... You're like a plaintive ... melody ...' There was a pause, then he sang loudly, 'Jessie – I've had no tea ... I ... 'm so hungry I could eat ... a horse ...'

When he found the letter propped on the table, telling him to report to the Tower, he staggered up the stairs, drunk and flabbergasted, as if it had arrived without any warning whatsoever. 'Jess. Jess ... they can't do this to me ...' he said, hardly able to end a sentence. 'I can't leave you, Jess.'

His performance irritated her. 'Tom, you'd better sober up. An' didn't you once say, you'd fight to the bitter end to keep Hitler's hands off Britain?' She tried to hold in her anger. 'Stop play-actin' and go to bed – in the box room, where you can snore as loud as you like. I need my sleep.'

But Tom had been in no mood to be quietened. 'I wasn't looking forward to going away to fight Hitler, Jess ... and I *don't* snore.' He did and he knew it.

'When you're this drunk you do. Where'd the money come from for your night out?' She wasn't going to let him off the hook.

Winking, hoping to soften her, Tom smiled and then hiccuped. 'Perks. Perks of life. A parcel fell off a lorry as it was coming out of the dock gates ... and the driver pulled away without realising.' Hunching his shoulders he sported that look of innocence he often used. 'What could I do but pick up that parcel? I've had a few beers, Jess, that's all. I was celebrating with my brother, Stanley. We sold most of the stuff.'

'And the rest?'

'We've, er, we've stored it,' he said, telling what he would

call a white lie. 'Round a mate's house.' Play-acting or not, he suddenly looked like a man in the depths of a despair as he sat on the edge of their bed. 'Not much to celebrate though, is there? I've got to leave you, Jessie, and I don't wanna do that.' Watching him waving the call-up papers in the air, she knew very well that he was deliberately being melodramatic. 'They can't mean it. I'm not a bloody soldier, I'm a decorator!' He slumped down on to their bedroom chair, a sorry sight. Looking like a frightened child, head lowered, he sobered up and became more serious and more honest. He said haltingly, 'This has really upset me.'

That got Jessie's back up. 'Upset *you*?' she snapped. 'Well, how do you think *I* felt? I saw those papers and went crying to your mother and *you* went down the pub.'

'Yeah, but . . . I hadn't seen the letter, *had* I?' he said, trying to get her sympathy. 'I wouldn't have gone out if I *had* seen it, Jess. You know that.'

It all seemed so trivial now, looking back. But Jessie still believed that it was the stress of Tom's antics and his call-up that had brought on her birth pains the very next day, two weeks before her time. For a while, it had been touch and go if she and the baby would live. Thank God it had been all right.

Pushing all of that from her mind, Jessie left her baby in his pushchair, happily watching Harry the rabbit, and went inside to make herself another cup of tea. After all, there was worse to come now. Bloodshed and killing of innocent people, men, women and children, with bombs dropping all over the world. She feared for Tom who underneath it all was a real softie at heart. He had cried his eyes out on the night Billy was born when they had very nearly lost him. It had been a close thing and they were lucky that their baby had an excellent midwife to watch out for him and Jessie. Not only had he arrived early and unexpected but when she finally gave birth, the house had gone dark. The electric meter had run out of coins. Worse still, the

umbilical cord was caught round Billy's neck and the midwife had only the light of a torch to work by.

'Never mind, Billy,' Jessie whispered, 'I won't let anything 'appen to you. No. It would 'ave to be over my dead body.' She looked up at the sky. 'Please, dear sweet Jesus, keep me safe so I can take care of my baby.'

To Jessie's surprise and joy, Tom was allowed home for an overnight visit the day after war had been declared and before he was posted abroad. When he turned up on the doorstep, she simply couldn't believe it. He was the best sight for sore eyes anyone could wish for and she didn't want to let him out of her sight. They made the most of every minute together, hardly apart, always in the same room, always with Billy – and for the first time since she had known him, Tom helped her in the kitchen, preparing food, washing up, anything so long as he was by her side and touching her. In bed, they made love for most of the night, clinging to each other as if they might never see each other again.

At the breakfast table, Tom looked terrible. His eyes red and his face drawn. 'I don't want to go, Jess,' he said, choked. 'I want to stay here with you and Billy.'

'You can't, Tom, you know that. Try not to think about it.' She was finding it all too much and her voice gave her away. Of course she didn't want him to go but what choice had they?

'Why am I going?' he said, looking like a child about to be abandoned. 'I don't wanna murder people and I don't want a bullet through my 'ead. All I want is to stay back 'ere in Bethnal Green, go to work, and come home to my family. That's not too much to ask, is it?'

'No, but you 'ave to go for the same reason as every other man. If you don't go out there and stop Hitler, he'll take this country and who knows what kind of a life we'll be facing. This is a free country, Tom. Fight to keep it

that way. For Billy, if not for us. Think of 'is future and our grandchildren.'

'I s'pose you're right,' he said, sipping his tea. 'Greedy bastard wants to own and rule the world. Territorial rights. That's what this is all about. The twentieth century and we're still thinking like cavemen.'

Jessie glanced at the clock. 'We'll 'ave to get a move on soon. You don't wanna miss your train back.'

'I won't miss it, Jess, 'cos I've no intention of catching it. I'll go back in a few days' time. Say I 'ad the flu. Doctor'll give me a sick note. He's all right. We 'ad a chat last time I was back when I met 'im in the street. He didn't know it but I was checking up on what his views were.'

Jessie laughed out loud. 'Silly bugger, Tom. Course he knew what you was up to. Don't you think that scores of other men'll be trying it on? There'll be a mile-long queue outside 'is surgery, you see if I'm wrong.'

'Well, there you are, then,' said Tom, easing a cigarette into the corner of his mouth. 'There's my excuse. I couldn't get an appointment.'

The banter continued until Jessie realised that he really had made up his mind. He wasn't going back that day and relief began to take over from worry. She would have him around for a couple more days and where was the harm in that?

They made the most of their two extra days together. Instead of Tom going down to the pub, Jessie fetched home ale in a jug and she couldn't remember a time when they had been more in love and happier.

But fate had something up its sleeve. The very morning that he had intended going back, there was a knock on the door and it had the same sound to it as what was commonly known as the 'copper's knock' in the East End. Tom was playing with Billy, jumping him up and down on his lap, his uniform ready and waiting on the back of the kitchen door. Jessie was in the kitchen frying bacon and poaching eggs. Coming into the

living room, she paled. 'Tom.' Her voice was no more than a whisper. 'Tom, I think it's the red caps.'

His mood now sombre, Tom slowly nodded, showing that he was thinking the same thing. 'Take Billy. I'll open the door.'

Dressed only in his trousers with braces dangling, Tom faced them. Neither of the two men on the doorstep said a word, they just stared into his face. 'Fair enough,' said Tom. 'I was going back today anyway.' He waved them in and closed the door. 'Fancy a bacon sandwich? I'm just frying breakfast for the wife while she feeds the baby.'

The delicious smell and sound of the sizzling bacon was tantalising and something that no ordinary man could resist and, duties aside, these two were ordinary men.

'Take a seat,' Tom offered. He winked at Jessie and went into the kitchen to take up where she had left off. They would have to do without eggs – the bacon was ready and he didn't want to keep them waiting longer in case they had second thoughts and resisted the sandwich.

'Them bloody barracks,' said Tom cheerfully, coming into the room, 'damp as you like. Thought I was in for pneumonia.' He handed each of them a sandwich. 'Felt all right when I woke up this morning though – apart from a splitting headache. I was gonna send in a sick note but you know what it's like when you're in bed sweating it out. And the doctor was too busy to come out.'

'I'm sure he was,' said one of the men, chuckling. 'You'd be surprised how many of you have gone down with this sudden epidemic which only seems to have affected blokes ready for war. Strange, that.'

Enjoying a short break from work and the unexpected pleasure of hot, crisp bacon between two slabs of baker's bread, the men kept their thoughts to themselves. And when Tom asked if there was time for him to have a quick wash and shave, they shrugged and told him to be quick about it. He left

Jessie telling the officers about baby Billy and how she feared he might have caught Tom's heavy cold on top of having just got over a chesty cough. They only half listened to her; they kept one ear on the movements of Tom upstairs.

Ten minutes later one of the men said, 'Sorry, Mrs Smith, but I'll have to ask you to fetch your husband. It's time to go.'

'Tom!' she called up the stairs but deep down she had a sickening sense he was not there. The creaking floorboards from Billy's nursery had been a dead giveaway as far as she was concerned. There was no reason for Tom to go in there unless he had decided to slip out of the upstairs back window.

Her instincts were right. Tom had gone and a neighbour hanging washing on the line had helped him by opening her yard door which led into another neighbour's garden and then to a narrow alleyway. All of this Jessie learned from her neighbour once the military police, furious and red-faced, had gone. The woman was pleased with herself and Jessie had to smile, though she really would have liked to scream.

'It was good of you to help out,' she said, 'but he'll get into more trouble for it. He should have known better.'

Laughing, the woman left Jessie to herself. She and the other women in the street knew Tom Smith quite well and it didn't surprise them one bit that he'd managed to dodge away. To them it was funny but then they didn't have to rely on him to stay put and ensure that the army paid Jessie her pension to feed and clothe herself and Billy.

Tom made his own way to Thetford, unescorted. Once again, he somehow managed to talk his way out of trouble. He wrote to Jessie, telling her that being on the run from the army and dodging the red caps was not only stimulating but easy. His casual joking about it worried her. To Tom this was no more than a prank; to Jessie it spelled trouble.

Soon after war with Germany was declared, air raid sirens

were heard all around Britain but thankfully it was a false alarm – a false alarm, but a grim reminder that during this war ordinary people, young and old, would be a target. But Britain was prepared this time, unlike during the First World War. Prepared and as ready as they could be to face the ordeal ahead.

Gas masks were issued to adults and children and trenches had been dug in readiness. Important buildings were sandbagged and public air-raid shelters, built earlier that summer, were ready and waiting. Air-raid wardens had been well trained and knew what to do when the bombs began to fall. Auxiliary firemen, too, had been drilled and tested and knew how to tackle a growing fire as well as how to extinguish an incendiary bomb with a stirrup pump. The stamp of active war was present everywhere and the atmosphere, strangely enough, was not of depression but camaraderie as people of differing class and religion were drawn together, by the threat they all faced.

Before the month of September was out, communities began to break up as women and children were evacuated and men went off to fight for king and country. Over a million Britons were evacuated from the cities but Jessie had no intention of leaving the East End and neither did her family or several of her neighbours. They, like many others, chose to stay at home and rely on the government's offer of protection to every household in the big cities – an Anderson shelter, to be erected in the garden. The corrugated iron hut was to be sunk halfway into the ground and covered with earth and sandbags as a means of shelter from the bombing.

It was a strange time for everyone. Women took their responsibilities seriously and were strong in the face of having to begin new lives without their men and keep their heads above water and hold their families together. It wasn't really until January 1940, when the government issued millions of ration books, that the grim reality of what was to come truly hit home.

Four ounces of butter and four ounces of bacon or uncooked ham a week, with just twelve ounces of sugar per adult, was a joke as far as Jessie's mother-in-law, Emmie, was concerned. She was known for her cooking abilities and she did not want to let the side down. With just herself and Charlie at home to feed, she had volunteered to prepare meals for five old folk in her turning, who would find it impossible to fend for themselves under the circumstances. She wasted no time in rooting out extra provisions via the black market. Her husband, Charlie, too old to be called up, had joined the million other men who had signed up with the Local Defence Volunteers, which proved to be an excellent grapevine as to where those extra provisions might be found or swapped.

Jessie's mother, Rose, continued to run her cobbler shop with her youngest son, Stephen. Stephen's love for the stage had led him to join a local drama group; he found his vocation early in life – and his sexual preference. His mother's inner worry over the years that there might be something different about her son was becoming a reality. Stephen was destined to remain a bachelor boy. Jessie's other brother, the rebellious Alfie who was just seventeen, had secured work in the metal foundry, hoping this would release him from having to defend his king and country should the war drag on. Alfie had other fights to fight when fledgling mobsters crossed the territorial line of his gang's patch in Stepney, where he now lived by himself in two rooms above an Italian café.

As for Jessie, she worried about her sometimes irresponsible husband and was kept on her toes by her lively baby. The happy family life that she had been looking forward to was now overtaken by the war and the restrictions it brought, including the blackout. Even the tiniest hint of light from the edge of a window at night prompted an angry shout of 'Put that light out!' And, beneath the blackout curtains, like every other household, the windows were heavily taped to prevent flying glass, and so by day as well as

by night there was a constant reminder of the country being at war.

But Jessie took the war in good heart and like others began to grow food in every part of her garden. It was the same all over the country. Allotments, gardens, back yards, even window boxes were now being used solely to grow vegetables or fruit.

There were other changes too. Trees, kerbs and lamp posts had been marked with white to help in the blackout and women were doing the work of men in factories, shipyards and railway sheds. Ironically, the war was doing far more for the women's movement than the Suffragettes had managed in earlier years.

Jessie's sister Dolly had applied for a job as a bus conductor, which she loved, it being more sociable than any other occupation she could find. Petrol rationing had been introduced with a severity that forced many people take their cars off the roads and use public transport. Men from all walks of life now came into Dolly's happy orbit and she was always full of it when visiting her sister and nephew, baby Billy.

While Dolly chatted about the latest and most handsome sailor she'd met, Jessie hid her envy. To her, it seemed an age since she had enjoyed an evening out. To walk arm in arm with one of the tall blond Dutch sailors Dolly spoke of was a dream that often comforted Jessie when she was feeling at her lowest.

'I don't know why you don't come out with us, Jess,' said Dolly, carefully repainting her fingernails. 'Mum would come and sit with Billy, you know she would. You can't stay in forever.'

'It won't be forever, Dolly,' said Jessie. 'The war'll be over soon and my Tom'll be back where he belongs.' She strapped her son into his highchair and went into the kitchen. 'Watch him for me, Doll. He's worked out how to undo the buckle on his straps. It's spam sandwich with a bit of mustard for lunch.'

'That'll do me.' Dolly cupped Billy's double chin and kissed

his smiling face, finding some of his dribble. 'Erghh, you messy little sod!'

'What's he done now?' called Jessie, pleased to have him off her hands for five minutes.

'Messed up my lipstick!' Undoing his buckle, Dolly lifted her nephew out of his highchair to squeals of laughter. 'He weighs a blooming ton, Jessie! What you been feeding him on?' She tickled Billy under the arm and chuckled with him. 'Little fat sod, ain't yer?' she said, cuddling him. 'Handsome devil. Got your dad's lovely green eyes and your mum's blonde hair. Them little girls are gonna love you.'

Billy babbled on, talking in his own language.

'Gibberish,' said Dolly, laughing at him, 'that's all you can do. Talk a load of gibberish.'

'Juish,' said Billy, demanding more attention. 'Dirsty.'

Dolly pushed her face closer to his. '*Juice* not juish. And *thirsty* not dirsty. Billy try. *Thirsty*. Go on then ... *th-th-th-thirsty*!'

'Dirsty!' The fourteenth-month-old laughed out loud and clapped his podgy hands together. 'Juish!'

'You little tyke. *You* know. Yes you *do*. *You* know 'ow to say it.' She tickled him again. 'I can't wait to get one of these little bundles of trouble, Jess.'

Coming into the sitting room, Jessie sighed. 'You, a mother? Tied down to the kitchen sink?'

'I'm talking about later on once the war's over and I'm ready to settle down. Have you heard from Tom this week?'

'A postcard came this morning. He's getting on all right with the French now. His landlady's come round at last.'

'Blooming cheek they've got, them frogs. I wouldn't mind, our men are out there in France for their bloody benefit, you'd think they'd be grateful.'

'Anyway, he seems all right.' Jessie took Billy from her for his afternoon nap. 'I hope he's behaving himself with all them mademoiselles, that's all.'

'That's doubtful,' said Dolly, biting into her sandwich.

'Oh, thanks! What a ray of sunshine you are,' said Jessie, taking Billy upstairs.

'Trouble with you, Jess, is that you go through life thinking nothing'll change! It's about time you livened up a bit. Come dancing with me and my mates tonight. You won't look back!'

'I'm a married woman, Dolly,' said Jessie, coming back into the room.

'So? Loads of married women whose men have gone to war go out. You can't sit in all the blooming time, Silly cow.'

Jessie dropped into an armchair, fed up. 'I don't sit in *all* the time. Once we've finished this bit of lunch I've got every intention of going out for a walk. You can wheel Billy in the pushchair for me.'

Dolly sipped her tea. 'A nice trip over the park, I s'pose.'

'Yep. And then on to visit Mum and Stephen. It's better than sitting in all day.'

'Yeah, I grant you that. It is better than that. Tch. I don't know. You're getting old before you've stopped being young.'

'And you're getting on my nerves. Be quiet for five minutes.'

That said, Jessie and Dolly sat in silence. Dolly wondered what she would wear to go out that evening and Jessie wondered whether she should hang the washing on the line or dry it by the fire. It was a crisp, bright January day but it could change to cloud and rain within minutes. 'Did you catch the weather forecast today?' she asked, miles away.

'No, funnily enough I missed it, Jess.' The last thing Dolly thought to do was listen to a weather forecast. 'If it rains we'll put our umbrella up. If it don't, we won't. It's risky but sod it, let's live dangerously on our walk, eh?'

Amused by her sister's sense of humour, Jessie snapped out of her mood. A couple of hours later she went upstairs to brush her hair and put on some lipstick and powder. Staring

at her reflection in the dressing-table mirror, she could see that Dolly had a point. She *had* turned into a dowdy housewife.

Wrapped up against the cold air, hats pulled down over their ears, with Dolly pushing the pram and Jessie by her side, they enjoyed the early January sunshine as they strolled along the Mile End Road to take Billy to visit his grandmother Rose. Turning into Whitehorse Road, they heard someone give a wolf whistle. Glancing over her shoulder to see if the admirer was worth a smile, Dolly was amused to see that it was Max, dressed smartly in a suit and unbuttoned dark overcoat.

'Well, well, well,' said Dolly, loving it, 'look who's come out of the woodwork.'

'Who?' said Jessie. 'One of your old flames?' She kept her eyes firmly fixed in front. She didn't want to be tarred with the same brush as her wayward sister. 'Or one of your new boyfriends?'

'No,' said Dolly, cockier than ever, 'one of yours.'

Max reached their side and tipped his hat. He had eyes only for Jessie. 'Mind if I walk with you?' he said, showing his row of perfect white teeth.

'Max, it's you!' Jessie, without thinking, kissed him on the cheek. She was pleased to see him and didn't mind who saw. 'Tom said you'd managed to stay in civvi street. Lucky devil.'

'It wasn't good luck, Jessie, it was bad luck. Wouldn't have me because ... apparently ... my feet wouldn't be up to all that marching.' He turned away from those blue eyes of Jessie's, which he had once adored, and paid attention to Billy who was sitting up, enjoying a Farley's rusk biscuit. 'He's a mixture of both of you, Jess,' he said, his regret showing.

'Right, well, if you'll excuse me and my nephew,' grinned Dolly, 'we'll be on our way.' Grabbing the handle of the pram again, Dolly strode off, wiggling her buttocks for Max's benefit. 'I'll see you at Mum's, Jessie!' she called back over her shoulder.

'She's a gem,' said Max with a smile. 'Come on, Jess,' he laid a hand on her arm, 'I've got masses to tell you and I want to hear how you've been coping.'

'I'm not sure, Max … you know what people are like. If Tom should get to hear—'

'That you walked along the street with me in broad daylight? Come on, Jessie, this isn't like you. What's happened to your self-confidence?'

'I don't know about that … but yeah, it's not as if it's nighttime, is it?'

'No. But then again, that didn't both us much once upon a time. So long as we were alone.'

'Don't, Max. Don't stir up all the memories. I'm married now and a mother as well.' She couldn't believe how shy and embarrassed she now felt in his company. 'Not that anyone would take me for anything else but a married woman. Dolly reminded me today how dowdy I was looking.' Jessie would be the first to admit that she was begging for a compliment. Max was right, her self-esteem was on the low side.

'Trust Dolly,' he said, quietly laughing. He remembered Jessie's exuberant, loud-mouthed sister well. 'She never was one for being tactful.'

'So you do think I look drab then?'

He squeezed her arm and an old familiar feeling swept through her. Nothing physical, just a nice friendly feeling. 'You look lovely, Jessie. Although your hair could do with styling. You should go and see the barber again.'

She laughed to be reminded of when she had once had her hair chopped off. Chatting about old times, they soon arrived at Joe Lyons, their previous regular meeting place. 'How's your mum and dad?' she asked, slipping on to a chair at their favoured table by the window.

'More relaxed than they were. At least the war's stopped all the other troubles. They had another brick through their shop window, you know. Blackshirts. I know what I'd like to

do if I came face to face with one.' Max looked murderous thinking of the racist attacks his family had suffered.

'Tom and his brother Johnnie walked out, you know, as soon as they realised—'

'That Mosley was likely to be interned?' Max cut in.

'No, it was before all that. They didn't know—'

'Jessie, please. Don't start making excuses for them. They were Blackshirts no matter what. I'll never forgive them. Never. No Jew would.'

Thankful when the waitress arrived with tea and cakes, Jessie took the opportunity to steer the subject back to Max's family. She hadn't heard from Mrs Cohen since she'd married and in a strange way Jessie had missed her. Only once or twice had Mrs Cohen been to visit her mother at the cobbler shop, next door to the Cohens' delicatessen. Having discussed Max's mother and father, Jessie took the bit between her teeth and mentioned Moira, his sister, the one who had been responsible for them breaking off their engagement.

'Moira's fine,' said Max soberly.

'But?'

'But she's been told she'll never have children and it's devastated her.' Max looked serious. 'She and Nathan will adopt children but not until the war's over.'

Breaking off a piece of her fruit bread and popping into her mouth, Jessie shrugged. 'Let's hope they don't adopt [illegible].'

Max looked bemused by her off-the-cuff remark. 'What makes you say that?'

'You mean you haven't heard?'

'Heard what, Jessie?' He leaned back in his chair and listened intently as she told the incredible story. Her parents, Rose and Robert, had been young newlyweds just after the First World War and very poor, unable to feed and clothe one baby, let alone two. Rose's half-brother Jack Blake and his German wife Gerta had pleaded to adopt one of the twins since

Gerta could not herself have children. It had been a well-kept secret and had it not been for Tom introducing the twin girls much later in life, neither Hannah nor Jessie would have known anything about each other. Hannah would have continued to live in Bethnal Green with her adopted mother, Gerta, who had turned out to be a tyrant – a cold, uncaring woman and a strong supporter of the Blackshirts. Hitler was Gerta's hero and Mosley her heartthrob. Since the day the girls had discovered they were twins they had become closer than very best friends. Closer than ordinary sisters. Ending her story, Jessie said, 'I always knew something was wrong. I thought I was losing my mind at times. Missing someone who didn't exist. That I *thought* didn't exist. And then, wham bang, it's out in the open.'

'You've lost me, Jess . . .' He chuckled. 'My loss, not yours. But there we are – you chose Tom.'

'Max, please. Don't.'

'I can't help it. We would have been married by now. I would have married you, Jess. I *should* have married you.'

'No. Billy wasn't your baby.'

'That wouldn't have mattered. It doesn't matter now even.'

'Maybe not but what *does* matter is that I love Tom. I love him and I'll wait for him.' She sipped her tea and looked at him over the cup. 'You're not shocked then at my having a twin sister?'

'I *am* shocked. You've shocked me. You've really shocked me, Jessie.'

'I know,' she said, enjoying the thrill of shaking the one person she thought was unshakable. 'Mum's been more relaxed since it came out. She's been wonderful, Max. She bought most of the things for the baby – the pram, pillows, blankets . . .'

'Jessie,' said Max, a faraway look in his eyes, 'I can't believe you've got a twin.'

'You will once you meet her. She's more attractive than [illegible].'

'I don't know what to say.'

'I know what you mean. It came as a shock to me as well.'

'*Your* twin. I can't wait to meet her.'

'Well, once she's back for good, I'll introduce you.'

'Back? You mean she went off again?'

'War work. For the government. Can't talk about it though.'

'Why not?'

'Because I haven't got a clue what she does. I suppose you've heard about our Alfie?'

'Alfie.' Max chuckled. 'He surprised us all, didn't he? Who would have thought that little wayward sod would have turned out to be so independent and quick off the mark.'

This attitude from Max surprised her. 'What are you talking about?'

'Well, he's employed, at the ammunition factory, he's got himself a nice little flat and he's involved in good work – selling tickets for charity in Mile End. He even helped by selling dance tickets in aid of the Boys Jewish Club. Made two pounds for us, Jessie.'

Yes, thought Jessie, two pounds for your club and four pounds for Alfie, more like. 'Oh, good. He is keeping up the good work then.' There seemed little point in spoiling her brother's good if false reputation. Maybe he would grow into it.

'Speaking of which, I should be off soon, Jess,' said Max, checking his watch. 'I'm due at the under-eighteens' boxing club. I've joined the board.' Pausing for a few seconds, he looked into her face. 'Can we do this again? Or maybe go to the pictures instead?'

'I don't know, Max. Let me have a think about it.'

Of course. Listen, I've just got to pop next door to the

tobacconist.' He stood up and Jessie felt sure he'd grown taller. 'Wait here for me. I'll be two minutes,' and he rushed out of the tearooms.

'Did you want some more tea?' The waitress's voice drifted through Jessie's thoughts.

'No thanks. I'm just waiting for my friend to come back from the shop next door and then we'll be off.'

The girl broke into a smile and looked relieved. 'I thought he'd walked out on yer.'

'No . . . and he's just a friend. An old mate. Not a boyfriend. I'm already married. He's gone to buy some cigarettes.' At that moment, Max returned, carrying a large box of chocolates which brought a different expression to the waitress's face. Jessie saw it as a smile of condemnation. She wondered if she and Max had looked like lovers sitting there, talking together as if the time in between seeing each other had never passed.

'These are for you, Jess,' said Max, offering her the pretty floral box of chocolates. 'A treat.'

'Max, I can't take those.' Jessie was aghast.

'Why not?'

'Well, my mother for a start. I'm just going round there, don't forget. She'll think we're up to something.'

'Don't be silly,' he said, pushing them into her hands. 'I don't know what things are coming to if I can't buy an old flame a small gift.'

'Small? It must have been the biggest box in the shop.'

'Maybe. Anyway, take them to your mother's and tell her they're for you, her and Dolly, if that makes you feel better.'

'It does, Max. Thanks.' Jessie stood up to leave with him and was embarrassed when he took her arm. She could feel the eyes of the young waitress on her and felt guilt creeping in again. She imagined Tom looking in on the scene – he would be angry and jealous, hurt and scared. Frightened that he might be losing his wife.

'Thanks for the tea, and the chocolates. I'll see you . . . some

time. When Tom's back on leave, maybe we could go for a drink together. In a foursome?'

'Maybe,' he said, tipping his hat. 'See you around.'

'Max, don't go.' Embarrassed, she smiled and shrugged. 'Well, not with that look on your face anyway.'

'What look?'

'Doom and gloom.'

Relaxing into his usual easy-going manner, he smiled. 'Jessie, listen. If anything should happen ... I mean if you need me, well, you know where I am.'

'Thanks. I'll remember that.' Exchanging a look that required no spoken word, they turned and walked away from one another.

OVER BETHNAL GREEN will be available from July 2000.
Don't miss it.

Docker's Daughter

For my family

– Pete, Esther, Duncan and Robin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter One

London 1962

It was two in the morning when the shrill ringing of the telephone pierced the dark silence of Kay's bedroom. Instantly awake, she was filled with panic. Why would anyone ring at such an hour? Blanking horrid thoughts from her mind, she listened for sounds from her parents' bedroom. Not afraid of the dark but of what might lie behind the phone call, she pulled herself up in bed and waited, hoping it would stop. Maybe someone had dialled a wrong number.

Three rings later she shot from her bed out of the room and along the passage, her hand sweeping the wall until it found the light switch.

'Hallo?' Kay's voice was quiet but her tone almost dared the caller to give her bad news.

'Kay . . .' It was her aunt Liz. The heavy pause that followed told her something terrible had happened to her uncle Bert. That wonderful, healthy,

lovable man who had just celebrated his birthday. Pushing her long blonde hair from her face, Kay composed herself before asking what was wrong.

'Get Daddy for me, there's a good girl . . .' Liz's weak voice trailed off.

Jack being a heavier sleeper than Laura moaned and turned over as Kay's urgent voice woke her mother. 'Was that the phone?' She was still half asleep.

Before Kay had a chance to say who it was, Laura was out of bed in a flash. Just awake but alert enough to realize that only grave news came at that hour, she repeated over and over to herself, *Please don't let anything have happened to Dad.* Grabbing the black receiver with one hand, she steadied herself with the other, gripping the back of the chair, feeling light-headed and giddy from getting out of bed too quickly. Her heart was thumping as the dread of hearing her ageing father ask for help swept through her. She had asked him many times to give up his cottage and move in with the three of them.

'It's Aunt Liz,' Kay whispered as she stood in the kitchen doorway waiting to hear the worst.

'Liz – what's wrong?'

'I think Bert's . . .' her voice trailed off.

Slipping on to a kitchen chair, Laura drew her feet up off the cold linoleum and tucked her thin cotton

nightdress under her toes. 'Liz, please . . . what is it?' A cold chill ran through her. 'What's happened?'

'I've phoned for an ambulance.' Liz's voice sounded thin and empty. 'He called out—' She broke into a high-pitched cry, 'I thought it was just a nightmare! I thought he'd gone off again. I went back to sleep.' Another tense pause filled the space between them.

'I went back to sleep, Laura! May God forgive me . . .' Her pained voice struggled to control the sobbing. 'I went back to sleep.'

Backing away from her mother along the narrow passage, Kay leaned against her bedroom door and tried to control her breathing. She knew that something serious had happened. Gripping the handle to the door of her room, willing her hands to stop shaking, she stared back at Laura. She didn't want to hear what was coming. She wanted her mother to smile and relax her face.

'It's your uncle Bert. I can't protect you from this, Kay. And it's going to hurt.'

At that moment, Kay knew by instinct that this was going to be a turning-point in her life. Her mother was admitting that she could not protect her from everything that life threw her way. She had no choice but to deliver the crushing blow which was hovering like a weapon between them.

'He's dead,' Laura murmured, 'gone.'

Turning away, Kay threw herself on to her bed and screamed into her pillow. 'It's not *fair*! He's my uncle, Mum! My uncle Bert!'

Liz had taken Bert's sudden death very badly, and was unable to cope with anything, especially having him laid out in her front room as was the East End custom. She had been given tranquillizers, and could only just manage to drag herself through the days leading up to his funeral. Her round, smiling face which so often lifted those around her, was now ashen and drawn as she sat in her small, quiet living room with her younger brother, Jack. Her hair seemed to have gone from grey to all white in just a couple of days and her red-rimmed eyes were swollen from crying.

'If only I hadn't gone back to sleep Bert might still be alive.' She gazed into her cup and pushed a floating tea leaf to one side.

'Stop tormenting yourself, Liz. You heard what the doctor said, it was all over in seconds. There wasn't anything you could have done about it.' Rubbing his eyes, Jack sighed heavily. 'We have to be thankful he died in his sleep.'

'The house is so quiet. I'll never get used to it.' She sipped her tea which had been laced with whiskey.

'Why don't you stay with me and Laura for a couple of weeks? Till the funeral's over and you've had a bit of time to get used to the idea of being on your own,' he said, believing she would turn him down flat.

'That'd be nice, Jack. I would like that.'

Pleased that his sister offered no resistance, Jack thought he might as well touch on the other idea he had been turning over in his mind. Finding the right words was the most difficult part.

'Lizzie, I don't quite know how to say this.' Turning his head to avoid her searching eyes, he caught sight of Bert's polished boots in a corner of the room. 'I can see why it would be too much for you to have Bert's body . . .' he took a deep breath. 'Why don't we have him laid out in my front room instead of the chapel of rest?' He reeled the words out quickly. A painful silence hung in the room.

'His mates could come and go, and—'

'Yeah,' Liz cut in, making it easier for her brother. 'I would prefer that.' She slipped one of her heart pills under her tongue to ease the pain.

'Good. That's good.' He was relieved to have got that over with. Reaching for his hand, Liz squeezed it and looked into his grief-stricken face. 'Thanks, love. I would never 'ave got through this without

you and Laura.' She gave him a weak smile. 'Laura won't mind having me there, will she?'

'What d'you think?'

'Yeah. Silly question. We're like sisters really.'

'Too right.' He leaned across and tipped a little more Irish whiskey into her cup. 'We'll soon 'ave some colour back in those cheeks of yours.'

'What about our Kay?' Liz asked sadly. 'How's she taking it?'

'She's young. Seventeen. Still a baby. She'll get over it quicker than we will.' Jack lowered his head, praying to God he was right.

Laura had hardly entered their spare room since Jack had moved out of it and back in with her. With Kay by her side, she scanned the room in silence.

'Let's make it nice and bright for aunt Liz, Mum,' Kay said.

'Yeah.' Laura swallowed hard. 'Good idea.'

'I'll make a pot of tea.' Laura felt her daughter squeeze her arm before she left the room, and was thankful for the natural warmth she gave.

Standing by the window, the daylight falling across the pale blue candlewick bedspread, Laura imagined Jack lying there all those nights by himself and wondered why they had let it go on for so long. They had spent over four years living under the

same roof but not sharing the same bed, until Kay was nearly drowned in Kent two years previously, and both she and Jack were brought sharply back to reality.

The pale blue cover was significant for another reason. This third bedroom had been intended for their second child, Baby John, who had died in his sleep when he was no more than three months old. Neither Laura nor Jack had forgiven themselves for not waking when, as they believed, their baby would have made some small noise for attention. The cot had been placed as close to their bed as possible, yet neither of them had heard a thing.

Pulling the blue cover from the bed, Laura decided she would buy a new brightly patterned one for Liz. The curtains could come down too; she would run up some more on her new electric sewing machine. It wouldn't take her long and it would be worth it for more reasons than one. She didn't want to be reminded any more of the time when her marriage had almost broken down and she had done little, if anything, to stop it happening.

Had it not been for Kay's accident, she and Jack might not be together now. They did love one another, and probably always had. Pride and other people had got in their way and almost ruined it for good.

Sighing, Laura folded the bedspread and squeezed it on to a shelf inside a cupboard. The blue lampshade would go too; and so would the multicoloured rag mat. They could all go to the charity stall at Bethnal Green market. She silently thanked Bert for giving her the courage finally to bury the saddest time of her life.

'Goodbye, Baby John,' she whispered as she unscrewed the light bulb from the lamp and lifted the soft-blue shade from the stand. 'God bless.' She closed her eyes and willed herself to be strong. After all, that tragedy had happened a long time ago.

As Laura held the shade close to her, she looked out of the window and up at the sky. The sun was just coming out from behind a grey cloud and its rays streamed in and lit up the room.

'Look after Baby John for us, Bert.' The sun was on her face now, and its warmth seemed to flow through her body. Smiling, she sat down on the edge of the single bed, trying to recognize the new sensation filling her being. If she could have given it a colour it would be pale gold. Warm comfort seemed to fill the room as if someone who loved and cared were there.

'My God,' she whispered. 'You've found him. You're with him!' Leaping up from the bed, she pulled open the bedroom door. 'Kay! Kay!'

As Kay appeared in the kitchen doorway at the end of the passage, she and Laura stared at each other.

'It's Baby John,' she finally managed to say, 'he's alive. Your brother's alive.' She waited for the pained look on Kay's face to dissolve.

'Not here, not in our world, but somewhere else,' she said reassuringly as Kay came slowly towards her. 'He's happy. He's with your uncle Bert and they're both happy.'

Kay reached out and pulled her close, burying her face in her mother's thick, sweet-smelling hair. 'It's all right, Mum, it's all right.'

Laura pulled away and gazed at her. 'Kay, something just happened.' She swallowed hard and wiped the tears that were streaming from her hazel-green eyes. 'It was wonderful. I don't know how to tell you, but I've just been allowed to see into another world.'

'Come on. You'll be all right.' Kay led her into the kitchen, hardly daring to look at her for fear she would break down too.

'But these tears ain't grief. Don't you understand?' she said, emphasizing each word, as if Kay were too young to take it in.

'I'll put a little drop of brandy in. We could both do with it.' Still Kay couldn't look at her mother.

Then Laura realized. The experience had been

meant for her and her only. It wasn't something she would be able to share. She would have to settle for that, and not go shouting it across the world.

Kay awoke to the sound of her dad sobbing in his sleep in the next room, and his tormented face sprang into her mind. She wondered whether she should go in and shake him out of the nightmare, knowing that once he stirred, he would not get back to sleep again. She decided against it. She didn't want herself or her mother to see her dad's sad eyes which had often been referred to as 'laughing blues'.

Having made up her mind to leave him, believing that dreams only lasted seconds, Kay climbed out of bed to make herself a cup of strong tea. She could always catch up on sleep.

Warming herself by the two-bar electric fire in the kitchen, she tried not to think about her uncle Bert lying so still on the other side of the wall, and started to make a mental list of the food she and her mum would need to buy for the funeral guests. It wasn't until the sound of birdsong began to break the silence that Kay felt brave enough to go into the front room and put the cut flowers in water. She caught a glimpse of her pale, freckled face in the mirror and grimaced at her red puffy eyes and lank hair. She vowed to catch up with herself soon and

pay a little more attention to the way she looked. Her own mother, her fortieth birthday approaching, still took pride in her appearance and Kay didn't want to let the side down.

As she slowly pushed the door open, the array of colourful blooms delivered courtesy of the florist brought a lump to her throat. She thought that if her uncle Bert's spirit was in that room he would be touched at the kind gesture made by their local shop. With this thought in mind, Kay took great care in arranging the flowers in glass vases.

Adding a light blue iris to red and white carnations, she felt lighter in mood as the early-morning April sun presented itself, shining through the net curtains and across Bert's open coffin. Up until then, she hadn't been able to look at him lying there so peacefully, but the sun seemed in an instant to have lifted her spirits, and Kay went over and looked down at the uncle she had loved, not caring that her tears were dropping on to the crisp white gown he was dressed in. Her dad had been annoyed about that. Jack had wanted Bert to be buried in his dark blue serge suit, but it was the last thing he had thought to tell the undertaker, and now it was too late.

When the day of the funeral finally arrived, Kay and Laura were busy all day pouring cups of tea and

forever cutting more sandwiches for the stream of relatives, friends and dockers who arrived. Numberless bottles of brandy, whisky and beer found their way into the flat. Every man brought a bottle of something, knowing how much they would all need the drink to help them through the day.

As the time drew nearer for the hearse to arrive, the noise reached a crescendo. A mixture of crying and laughter filled the flat as stories unfolded about Bert and some of the things he had unwittingly got himself into. Kay heard it all from the kitchen and smiled to herself. This was more like it. This was what uncle Bert would have wanted, everyone enjoying a good drink on his behalf.

She caught Laura's eye and smiled back at her. She had said earlier that she didn't want her seventeen-year-old daughter to wear black. Kay lowered her head and hugged herself, perched on a chair in the crowded kitchen. The sharp contrast of her long blonde hair against the little black dress she was wearing looked wrong. She was too young to be in mourning but respect had to be paid.

Weaving among the guests, Laura reached Kay and took her by the shoulders, gently guiding her out and into her bedroom. Sitting her down on the edge of her bed, she lifted Kay's chin and smiled bravely into her face. It was just a couple of weeks

ago that Laura had said how grown-up Kay was, but now the expression on her mother's face showed that she was seeing her as a baby again.

'I know it hurts, Kay,' she said gently. 'It's the first time for you . . . well, apart from your brother, but you were too young to remember that.'

She hadn't been too young. She did remember it. But this wasn't the time to say so. 'Will it ever go away, Mum, this feeling inside? This pain that doesn't hurt like a pain usually does?'

Unable to answer, Laura moved across the room and looked out of the window, anything to avoid Kay's searching blue eyes.

'BERT, BERT, I LOVE THAT SHIRT!' The suddenly booming voice of good old red-faced Harry the insurance man, and the robust laughter that followed, took them by surprise.

'Mum, how could he?'

'I knew it wouldn't be long before they'd have to say something about them white frills,' Laura chuckled through her tears.

'WHERE DID YOU GET THAT SHIRT? WHERE DID YOU GET THAT SHIRT?'

Now it was the turn of Bert's brothers, Frank and Freddie. The song resounded through the flat, and there was no doubt in Kay's mind that the entire block could hear it. Shrugging, a wan smile on

her lips, she joined in and encouraged her mum to do the same. Within seconds, they were singing at the tops of their voices and crying at the same time.

While the mourners braced themselves inside the flat, ready for the undertaker to arrive and screw down the lid of Bert's coffin, wreaths and tributes were arriving, and neighbours dutifully laid them outside the block of flats until the tarmac where the children usually played was covered in flowers, with only a driveway left for the funeral cars when they arrived. A wreath had even been hung over the *No Spitting* sign.

There were hearts, crosses, footballs. One arrangement was shaped like a docker's hook. It was a farewell fit for a king. Bert's family were known and liked in the East End, even by men who had connections with the underworld.

Kay watched proudly as her dad slipped his broad shoulders underneath the front of the coffin, and together with Bert's three brothers, carried it out of the flat and down the flights of stairs while the official pallbearers stayed close by, ready to move in should any of the intoxicated men give way. They need not have worried; these were strong men, full of pride, and nothing in the world would have

stopped them fulfilling their role of carrying Bert to the hearse.

'Chin up, Liz mate,' one of the neighbours called out as the women stepped into the funeral car.

'Take care of 'er, Laura!' called another.

Through her black veil, Liz's tear-stained face could only manage a weak smile as she showed a hand to the crowd that had turned out.

The procession following the family mourners seemed to go on for ever, until they had left the council estate. The funeral cortège made its way along the narrow backstreets, passing several elderly gentlemen who stood with their heads lowered, caps in hand, as the cars continued towards East India Docks, where they would pause to allow the rest of the dockers to pay their last respects.

'So when we remember our dearly departed Albert, let us not forget that God has always been there, from the moment of birth until death. And in our hearts we shall always remember that . . .' the vicar glanced down at the papers in front of him, 'that . . . Albert—'

'Bert!' Jack cut in impatiently. 'He was known as Bert!' His voice echoed around the silent church and was followed by mumbling from the rest of the congregation. Some were embarrassed by his

outburst, some agreed with Jack, others just wanted to get the whole thing over with.

'He was christened Albert, Dad,' Kay whispered.

'I know that!' Jack's angry face turned away from her and glared up at the vicar in the pulpit. 'Just get on with it, will yer! You've bin up there for twenty minutes telling us what a lovely man we're about to bury. D'yer think we don't know that?'

'Shush, Jack. Show some respect.' Laura gripped his arm. 'The man's only doing his job.'

Jack swallowed, ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head slowly at the vicar. 'You said the same things—' there was a crack in his voice, 'two years ago, when we buried Alf the Overcoat!'

Whether it was from drink or delayed shock Kay had no idea, but she found herself giggling at her dad's remark. When she heard other people trying to stop themselves laughing she let herself go. Adding insult to injury, a mourner in the back pew then relieved himself by evacuating a long, psalmodic gust of wind.

'God, that's terrible.' Kay was deeply embarrassed by the way the vicar was losing control over his drunken congregation. The service was quickly turning into a farce.

'I'm sorry, Kay,' Laura chuckled, 'but you're gonna have to get used to the idea that this lot

won't put up with hackneyed sermons. Especially not at a time like this.'

Turning her head to look at everyone, a faint smile appeared on Kay's lips. 'You're right,' she murmured, 'and so are they. And uncle Bert would 'ave been the first to say so.'

Kay squeezed Laura's hand, then looked from her mother up to the perplexed vicar and wondered how he would manage to conduct the rest of the service. She needn't have worried; as if by telepathy, her uncle's brothers, Frank and Freddie, were making their way towards the coffin with her dad and a family friend close behind. As they lifted it on to their broad shoulders, the vicar quickly signalled to the organist to play.

A respectful hush fell upon the church as everyone softly sang Liz's chosen hymn:

> Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
> The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:
> When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
> Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

With Liz, Kay and Laura following closely behind, the men walked in a stately manner along the aisle, carrying the much loved Bert to his final resting place.

Chapter Two

'Freelance docker? There'll be bloody murders, I'm telling yer! Once the word spreads. Then we'll see. Sly bleeders.' Jack pinched the smouldering tip of his roll-up between his thumb and finger and dropped the dog-end into an ashtray. 'Giving Bert's job to an outsider? They knew what they were doing, all right.' Pushing open the lid of his tobacco tin with his thumb, he pulled out a few strands of Golden Virginia. 'They'll get more than they bargained for, you mark my words.'

Curled up in an armchair, gazing up at the ceiling, Kay couldn't help thinking about her uncle and how his name might be used to stir up more anger and add another wharf to the growing unofficial dock strike that was spreading through London. Only two weeks out of this world and not allowed to rest in peace.

'Does it really matter, Jack?' Laura said. 'At least they took someone on. One more off the dole queue.'

Jack's light blue eyes glared back at her, his high cheek-bones flushed with anger. 'You can't see it, can you? The reason the strike started up in the first place was because they did the very same thing at another wharf! A supervisor died and they gave his job to an outside man. They've done the selfsame thing to Bert. If that's not deliberately pouring oil on the fire, I dunno what is.' He flicked the top of his Zippo and lit another roll-up.

'And now more and more cases are coming to light. Most of them casuals don't hold union cards.'

Turning his back on Laura, Jack stared out of the veranda windows and sighed. 'Six regulars applied for that job, and it goes to a casual labourer.' He turned and looked her in the face. 'How d'yer reckon Bert would 'ave felt about that, eh?' He swallowed hard and pressed his lips together, willing himself not to break down.

'Leave him out of this, Jack. You'll only upset Liz. Best she doesn't know about it—'

''Course she'll get to know about it!' he barked, not bothering that she hated to be interrupted. 'You think I'm the only one who's livid?' He stormed towards the living-room door and pulled with vengeance at the handle. Turning back to her he said, 'Our blokes'll come out now; join the other wharves on strike, and if you ask me, it's about time as well!

'Once Jack Dash gets the bit between his teeth, you'll see, we'll bring this government to its knees.'

The slamming of the door behind him sent a shiver down Kay's spine. In her heart she felt that her dad was right and secretly believed that the Import Trades Committee wanted to break the trade union and eventually would. As far as she could tell from listening many times to Billy, her grandfather, who had been a stevedore for a good part of his working life, some union officials were inclined to push management too far too fast, and their demands could lead to the end of the London docks.

Slipping her feet into her shoes, Laura sat upright on the sofa, where she had hoped to have a little doze on her afternoon off. Thursday was the day she looked forward to all week. A time when the flat would be empty and she could spend an hour or so thinking.

'What time d'yer think you'll be in for dinner?' she called after Jack.

'Don't know! Leave it on steam if I'm late. And if any of the men drop by – tell 'em I'll be in the Carpenter's Arms later on!'

Relieved that Jack would be out for the rest of the afternoon, she kicked off her shoes again and lay down, flinching at the sound of the front door banging behind him.

'I wish he wouldn't slam the door like that,' Laura said, closing her eyes.

'I'm going out for a walk, to the museum.' Kay kissed her mother lightly on the cheek.

'I thought you'd grown out of that,' Laura smiled as her eyes glazed over. She was remembering. 'You used to spend hours in that place, gazing at that big doll's house . . . you must know every nook and cranny.'

'I won't be long. Enjoy your catnap.'

Resting her head on a cushion, Laura closed her eyes and tried not to think about the turbulent weeks that lay ahead. For Jack to walk out of the docks as soon as he heard about Bert's job going the way it had meant that a few others would have followed him. It was just over an hour since he had thrown down his docker's hook in a temper. The entire wharf would have heard about the business and there would be pandemonium.

It was all a far cry from the dreams of tranquillity and country living she had been caught up in just over two years ago. Allowing the face of Richard, her ex-lover, to move into her imagination, she wondered if they would ever see each other again.

While Liz sadly packed her few belongings into a small suitcase, Kay sat on the edge of the bed

studying a holiday brochure. She had given up trying to persuade her aunt to stay on another week until she had had more time to get over uncle Bert. Looking up from the colourful pictures of sand, sea and sunshine, Kay studied Liz's face. She was caught up in another world.

'Why don't you come to Spain with me, aunt Liz? I'll look after you.'

A faint smile swept across the ageing face. 'I couldn't take that foreign food, Mog. I've only just got used to the idea of eating chicken chow mein. Besides, they eat horse meat over there, don't they?' She chuckled, carefully folding her mauve cardigan and laying it on top of a grey skirt.

'Dad always goes on about that, but I never know if he's kidding or what.'

'Your dad's all right about you going, then?'

Knowing how her dad had first reacted to the idea of her going away with her friends, and abroad at that, Kay knew that he wouldn't give in on this one. 'He'll come round.' She couldn't keep the touch of defiance from her voice.

'I wouldn't bank on it.'

Kay laid the brochure on top of her aunt's open suitcase. 'Look at that. He can't have anything against me going there. It looks like paradise!'

'Yeah. So do all the pictures in them magazines.'

'It beats hop-picking though, don't it?' Kay smiled, turning over the pages, hoping to impress her aunt.

Sitting on the edge of the bed next to Kay, Liz became pensive, staring at nothing. Kay knew she was thinking about uncle Bert. She had a vision of him herself, bending down by the fireplace outside the huts, setting it up ready for cooking the Sunday pot-roast.

'He was a good picker.' Liz smiled. 'Loved the smell of them 'ops; and the flavour it added to his cheese sandwiches.'

'Didn't put hops in with the cheese, did he?' Kay said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

'No. The taste came from handling 'em.' Liz looked down at her own hands and thumbed her wedding ring. 'Poor old Bert,' she whispered, 'two years of saving up for that caravan and now he'll never get the chance—'

'But you will, aunt Liz, and that's why he bought it in the first place,' Kay cut in. 'For you. To make up for no more hopping. You know he did.'

'Yeah.' Liz patted her niece's hand, 'You're right there, Mog. He would 'ave died a little bit easier knowing he'd left me that hut on wheels.'

'Liz!' The bedroom door flew open and Laura stood in front of them grinning from ear to ear. 'That was the employment officer at Hammond's

on the phone! You've got the job! The crotchety old cow's turned out to be human after all.'

'Oh, Laura. I 'aven't worked for over five years.' A worried expression came to Liz's face.

'You'll fit into that canteen like a glove. The women are great, you'll love 'em.'

'What will I 'ave to do?'

'Serve the staff with tea and sandwiches. Couldn't be easier.'

'It will get you out of the house, aunt Liz,' Kay added.

Sighing, Liz rolled her eyes. 'When do I start?'

'Monday.' Laura grinned.

'What do I wear?'

'They'll give you a pink and white check overall and a little white hat.'

'But will they 'ave one in my size?'

'Will you care if it's a bit loose?'

'Do me a favour, Laura. Whose uniform will I be slipping into, two-ton Tessie's?'

Laura gave Liz a quick once-over. 'You've lost at least a stone Liz, I bet you're down to ten now.'

Liz liked that. She stood up and examined herself in the mirror. 'You could be right there, Mog. This frock's hanging off me. Reckon I'll 'ave to use a bit of the insurance money to buy some new clothes.'

An encouraging cheer went up from Kay and

Laura as Liz turned away, embarrassed. 'To please Bert, of course,' she added quickly. 'He wouldn't want me looking like a sack of potatoes.'

Making fun of her own position in the fashion department at Hammond's, Laura stood behind Liz and pulled at the spare fabric of her dress until it was skin-tight. 'This dress was simply *made* for modom! A little tuck here and a little tuck there.'

'Think I might 'ave a little rinse when I go to the hairdresser's. What d'yer reckon on a Deep Chestnut?' Liz was beginning to sound like her old self again.

'Only if you let me pay,' Laura said.

'You're on. Manicure?' she asked, pushing her luck.

'A bottle of nail varnish. If you behave yourself.' Laura turned to Kay and the smile drained from her face when she saw the holiday brochure in her hands.

Letting go of Liz's dress, Laura looked at the reflection in the mirror and raised an eyebrow. Then picking up one of the brochures she flicked through the brightly coloured pages and slowly shook her head.

'It's no good, Kay. Your dad won't budge on this one. No way he'll let you go abroad.'

'No?'

'No!'

'Pamela's parents can't seem to understand his attitude. She's ready and waiting to book. Waiting for me to make up my mind.' Kay was feigning indifference, determined to get her way in the end.

'She'll be going with a proper travel agent, Laura.'

'Talk to Jack, Liz, not me. She can go to Australia for all I care!' Laura stormed out of the spare room.

'She doesn't want you to go either, then?'

'No.' Kay was close to tears.

'It's only because they're worried about you. You're all they've got. You mean everything to 'em.'

How many times that thought had gone through Kay's mind she couldn't say. One thing was clear though. She was beginning to feel trapped by their devotion. Somehow she would have to make them realize that she was a person as well as their only child.

'I only wanna go for two weeks. And to Spain, not outer space.'

'Perhaps next year, eh? Give 'em time to get used to the idea that you're growing up.'

'Don't you mean *grown-up*?' Turning away Kay lowered her voice. 'And still a virgin, in case that's what's bothering them.' Before Liz had time to butt

in, she continued, 'And if they think I'm going all that way just to lose it to some Spaniard they need their brains looking at.'

'I don't think that's what's on their minds.' Liz couldn't help smiling.

'Oh, of course it is! Why else would they want to stop me?'

'You don't listen to a word I say, do you?'

'I heard what you said but I don't agree. It's not because I'm an only child!' She hid her face behind the pages and murmured, 'Anyway I'm going, no matter what they say.'

'You think I don't know that? You'll be forging his signature on your passport, knowing you.' With that risky remark, Liz quietly left the room.

Staring into space, Kay suddenly felt lighter inside as she remembered an article she had read in a woman's magazine. An astrologer had written that while some people felt trapped by invisible bindings others put on them, what they failed to realize was that all it took was an invisible knife to cut themselves free.

Turning back to the picture of white sand and turquoise sea, Kay knew that it was time for her to do just that. How that could be achieved and when was something else. But do it she would, before they suffocated her.

Reversing into the edge of the kerb outside Liz's house, Jack's face fell as he caught sight of the white blinds on the windows. A reminder of what they had left behind. 'You sure you'll be all right on your own, Liz?'

'You are gonna come in?' She tried to cover the concern in her voice.

''Course I am. I'm talking about once I've left.' He pulled the brake on and turned to face his sister. 'I would stop the night, but I've got the meeting—'

'I don't want you to stop the night,' Liz cut in. 'I've got to start fending for myself sometime.' She looked back into Jack's face. 'You can stay for a cup of tea though, can't yer?'

''Course I can. Don't 'ave to be there for another hour.'

Liz sat her handbag square on her lap and sighed. 'I hope you know what you're letting us all in for, Jack. If this strike spreads the way you want it to.'

'It will,' he cut in. 'We'll go for an all-out if the managers don't back down. Hundreds 'ave joined us already.'

'Yeah, and hundreds of wives will be wondering 'ow they're gonna feed their kids on strike pay.'

Jack leaned back in his seat and stared out of the window. 'I'm telling you, Liz, this is the beginning of the end. If we let the London Port Employers get

away with this one, they'll be replacing registered dockers with non-union and casual labourers in no time.' He looked her straight in the eye. 'I've got a horrible feeling that the Dock Labour Board might welsh on us. So far it's just their attitude, but it all starts with a look, don't it? I reckon they'll approve listed men to unload vessels. They'll be condoning this "unofficial strike" next; you see if I'm wrong.'

'You're spending a lot of time on this strike, Jack. Kay and Laura's not seen much of you, if anything.'

'I know that. But this is our livelihood, Lizzie. If we don't safeguard it, who knows what the future'll hold?' He gave her one of his cheeky winks. 'Our Kay might marry a docker for all we know. For all 'er grand ideas, she might just settle for living by the docks in the end.'

Liz didn't want to get into that conversation right then. She had argued enough with her brother that he should encourage Kay to see a bit more of the world.

'It's a changing world all right,' she said instead, shifting the subject. 'Remember I said it would be different in the sixties? There's a strong feeling in the air. It's as if someone's messing about with the electricity; new lights coming on and old ones going out.'

'Well, all the more reason then to make sure our light bulbs stay right where they are and linked to the power!' Jack reached out and pulled one of Liz's carrier bags from the back seat. 'Now get out and get in there! I'm gasping for a cup of tea.'

Once inside the small terraced back-to-back, Jack took the stairs two at a time, saying he needed to have a pee. Slowly pushing open Liz and Bert's bedroom door he took a deep breath and went inside, making for the double bed. With one swift movement he pulled both pillows together, centred them and laid the special sympathy card he had bought that day on the silky gold eiderdown. Jack knew that going to bed alone was going to be a crippling emotional experience for his sister. At least she would have his letter, which he had slipped inside the card to help her through that first night.

With his invisible blinkers firmly in place, Jack strode out of the room. The last thing he wanted was to see Bert's personal bits and pieces around. Had he looked down, he would have seen the brown socks beside the bed that his brother-in-law and best friend had peeled off the night before he died.

'You know, it wouldn't hurt you to get yourself a decent-sized telly out of the insurance money, Liz.' Jack had been racking his brains for what he

might suggest could fill his sister's lonely evenings. 'I know someone who'd snap up your old set.'

'We'll see, Jack, we'll see.' Liz didn't want to think about the insurance money. 'Don't rush me, eh?'

'I just don't like to think of you by yourself.'

'Are you kidding? By myself? I'll have to pretend I'm out once my bingo friends start coming round to see me.'

'Yeah, that's true.' Jack smiled. 'You've always drawn 'em like a magnet. I was forgetting.'

'You was getting downhearted, Jack, I know that. I'm not daft. You're sitting in your best mate's front room, drinking a cup of tea, and he's not here and never will be.' Liz seemed to be drawing strength from her brother's weakness.

'Lizzie! You're one in a million, you know that?' He shook his head at her. 'And you can read me like a book.'

'Yeah. Who d'yer wanna give my old television set to, then?' she asked with a knowing smile.

'No one! I was thinking about you!'

'So you wasn't trying to kill two birds with one stone?' She pulled her little blue tin out of her pocket and sprinkled some snuff on to the back of her hand.

''Course I wasn't.' Jack looked away and wondered if Liz could see into his mind. It was true, he

did have an ulterior motive, but the thought really had only just come to him.

'Anyway, if I do decide, I'll let you have first refusal,' Liz said, in a mock-posh voice.

'Don't do me any favours,' he grumbled and sipped his tea, wishing he hadn't mentioned it in the first place. Liz was a canny woman and probably had a hunch he was thinking of paying Patsy a visit.

As Kay gazed out of an upper window of the 253 bus into the city on her way to work, the idea of forging her father's name on a passport form became a real possibility. It seemed the only way, since Jack had repeated the night before that she would only be allowed to go abroad when she was twenty-one. Unable to contain herself, she flashed a smile at the plump West Indian lady sitting beside her. Kay blushed as she heard herself telling a complete stranger that she was going to Spain for a holiday. 'Any room in your suitcase for me?' The woman grinned, showing off gleaming white teeth. 'I could do with some sunshine in me bones.'

Standing up ready to get off at the next stop, Kay bent down and whispered into her travelling companion's ear, 'I'm gonna forge my passport form.'

The woman's eyes widened and before she could say anything, Kay shrugged. 'It's the only way. My

dad won't let me go.' Making her way along the aisle, she grabbed the handrail as the bus pulled to a halt. 'Don't look so worried,' she called back, 'it might never happen!'

'I hope for your sake that it don't!' The woman shook her head at another traveller. 'Kids,' she said, and suddenly burst out laughing. Her peals rang through the bus and caused a fever of excitement to light Kay up as she jumped down on to the pavement. The woman was wishing her luck.

Making her way towards the building where she worked as typist and Girl Friday in the company secretary's office of Thompson's Windows, Kay began to make a mental list of the clothes she would take on holiday and the things she would need to buy. Her fortnightly salary amounted to just under fifteen pounds after stoppages, and she had hardly any savings. She would have to take the part-time job she had been offered in the tobacconist's the previous week, which would mean a ten-minute walk after work. It would also mean that her Saturdays and Sunday mornings would be spent serving customers instead of seeing her mates in the coffee bar.

'Day-dreaming again?' Jane from the typing pool grinned as she leaned across Kay and caught the far-away look in her eyes.

'Yeah,' she smiled, 'well, you know.'

Laughing, Jane looked up at the big round clock which hung below the company sign. 'We're ten minutes early. Fancy a frothy coffee?'

'Yeah, but that would make us ten minutes late, and you know what Mr Grieves is like for punctuality.' Kay pushed open the heavy glass-panelled door.

'I'm sorry to hear about your uncle,' Jane said, pressing her finger on the small brass lift button.

'Thanks.' Kay didn't want to think about it.

The sudden arrival of the lift, and the crash as Alf threw back the metal concertina doors, ended the conversation. Alf was thick with establishment.

'Makes a change for you girls to be early,' he said in his high-handed way. 'After a rise, are you?'

'No, Alf,' Kay smirked as she stepped into the lift, 'we just can't wait to see your welcoming face.'

Looking at his watch, the stern-faced man put it to his ear to check it hadn't stopped. 'We'll wait a few minutes,' he said, raising his chin defiantly. 'No point in wasting energy. There'll be more staff arriving soon.'

'Don't worry about it, Alfred, we'll walk.' Kay stepped out of the lift followed by her friend, and together they quickly stepped up the wide granite stairway, their stiletto sling-back shoes creating a clicking echo as they raised their voices so that Alf

would hear them say how antiquated the lift was, and it was time the firm changed it for an automatic one. Then, slipping into one of the panelled boardrooms, they sat down on velvet-covered easy chairs and shared a filter-tip cigarette, keeping an eye on the frosted glass walls for anyone passing by.

Kay listened with keen interest as her friend related her crazy weekend adventure. She had met a gorgeous mod at the Tottenham Royal dance hall and was in love again. A feeling of envy flared briefly in Kay but soon died. She had had boyfriends and a fair share of dates, but none of them had made her feel the way she had about Zacchi, the gypsy she left behind on the hop fields in Kent, just over two years ago. One day he would appear on her doorstep – she felt sure of it.

'So what was you day-dreaming about earlier on?' her friend asked, hoping for a return love story.

'Nothing much.' Kay pushed back her chair ready to leave. 'Come on, we'd best get out of here before we're caught.' She had no intention of telling her about the plan, no matter how friendly they were. No one must know. They might just spill the beans and stop her doing something that now seemed the most important thing in her life – getting a passport.

Cautiously the girls crept out of the plush surroundings; if Kay had had any idea right then that

she would feel like ending her misery in that very same boardroom, after being falsely accused of a crime she did not commit, her smiles and hopes would have been shattered. She had had a glimpse of prison life as a young child, when her dad had taken her to see her uncle Bert's brother, Frank, on the Isle of Sheppey – before she was taken for a paddle in the sea.

'Hallo, Thompson's,' said Kay in her poshest accent, learned from Marge on the switchboard. 'Thank you – putting you through now.' She pulled a plug on a black lead and pushed it into the correct extension number; pushed another key forward and told another caller she was sorry to keep him waiting. Answered another outside line, pulled at another plug and put the customer through; pushed another key forward and told someone else that the extension they wanted was now free, that she was connecting her. Reflexes on the switchboard had to be fast and concentration at peak level. Kay loved it. It was the highlight of her day when she relieved one of the telephonists for an hour, and was always surprised at how the time had flown by once the woman returned to take up her position.

'Come on, Kay, up you get,' Marge smiled at her apprentice. 'You'll be putting me out of a job soon.'

'Did you remember to buy my fruit?' June, the second telephonist asked. 'I've lost four pounds already. Hallo Thompson's. Thank you, you're through – I forgot to ask you to get me some cottage cheese for my dinner tonight. Sorry to keep you – line's still engaged. I've got to lose a stone in three weeks.'

Laughing, Marge said that one day June would say the wrong thing to the wrong person and upset a caller. Turning to Kay, who was removing the headphones, she gave her a studious look. 'You're looking a bit serious, lovey. Nothing wrong is there?'

'No, I was just thinking about my second job. I should be starting next week. I've never served in a shop before.'

'Second job?' Marge was grave.

'Maynard's, up by the Angel station.'

There was a heavy silence as both Marge and June looked from her to each other and back again. 'They don't allow you to have a second job here, lovey.' Marge spoke as if it were written in blood.

'Well, I won't tell them then.'

June covered her ears and chuckled. 'I never heard a word of that.'

'If they find out, Kay, they could give you the sack.'

'Oh, Marge . . . they wouldn't do that!'

'It's happened before, sweetheart. They don't like

to think that your mind's not on the job they're paying you to do. And let's face it, Kay, you are a bit of a scatterbrain at times.'

'No I'm not! Well, not when it comes to my work.' The door suddenly flew open and Mr Grieves appeared, looking far from tranquil.

'Isn't it time you were back in the office, Kay?' He looked at his pocket watch. 'You should have been off the switchboard four minutes ago.' He let the door swing shut between them.

'See what I mean?' Marge said, half smiling.

'Yeah,' Kay was thoughtful. 'You two won't say anything, will yer?'

They shook their heads; they wouldn't dream of splitting on her, but they didn't think she should take the risk of losing her job.

'I need the money,' said Kay, walking towards the door, 'I'm saving up to go on holiday. To Spain.'

'I don't know,' Marge shook her head again. 'That kid seems to tempt providence at least once a month.'

Laura tried to keep the worry of Kay out of her mind while she was at work in the fashion department at Hammond's. She knew her daughter could be moody at times, but this business of going abroad seemed to have possessed her. She wasn't sure that, should

Kay get a taste of travelling, she would want to settle down again.

'I can't see anything wrong with it.' The customer looked sideways at herself in the long mirror.

'I'm not sure . . .' Laura was trying tactfully to persuade a fifty-year-old woman away from the trapeze-line dress which stopped just above the knee, and was beginning to lose interest. When Liz came bustling in she was more than pleased to see her.

'Laura – I don't think I can go through with it.' Liz looked flushed and out of breath. Perspiration was trickling from her forehead down the side of her face. 'This bloody watch Jack got me to replace the bangle I lost is losing time, I swear it.'

Laura lifted Liz's hand and checked the time. 'It's fast, Liz, by ten minutes.'

'I'm sweating like a pig.' Liz wiped her forehead with a hanky, and then her armpits, feeling acutely embarrassed when the customer threw her a disgusted look.

Laura knew this woman was capable of finding a few select words to make her sister-in-law feel like dirt, so she took Liz by the arm and guided her away.

'I shan't keep you a moment.' Turning from the smirking face she winked at Liz. Then looking back at the woman Laura paused, and pretended to admire

her from the short distance between them. 'You know I think you were right, that style and colour does suit you. I thought those pink roses were too much, but they bring out the colour of your eyes.'

'Oh really?' The woman lapped up the compliment like a cat with double cream.

'I'll leave you alone for a couple of minutes. Feel free to wheel the other mirror over so you can see how lovely you look from all sides.' Seeing the suppressed grin on Liz's face, Laura marched her away.

'She looks like a lampshade gone wrong,' Liz murmured, keeping a deadpan expression. 'How she couldn't tell you was giving her the old flannel, I'll never know.'

'It's what she wanted to hear,' Laura whispered.

'I didn't mean to be late, Laura. I didn't wanna let you down.'

'You're not late, Liz. Bang on time. Stop worrying – you're making *me* feel nervous.'

As they moved through the store and into the staff canteen, Laura felt Liz relax when she saw the other members of staff smiling and sharing a joke or two. Once they spotted Liz, they gathered round and made her welcome. Feeling comfortable about leaving her there, Laura went back to the ageing would-be Dior model in her own department.

* * *

After her first day at work, Liz was only too pleased to follow Laura through the green gate into Delamar Place to spend ten minutes with Kay's grandfather. Once inside that small haven with the old brick wall separating them from the busy Whitechapel Road, Liz sighed with relief and admired the tiny front gardens of the cottages which were full of daffodils, tulips and hyacinths. Laura's dad, known as Billy to Liz, looked up, smiled and stretched. He was proud of his front garden and even prouder of the lovely, weed-free old paved pathway.

'Well?' he grinned, showing off a new set of teeth. 'How'd you get on, Liz?'

'Piece of cake.'

He nodded and shrugged. 'And a nice cup of tea to go with it, I suppose?'

Laughing at his little joke, they waited while he finished the job in hand, easing a stubborn weed from between the stones.

'It's a wonder you don't do your back in, Billy, bending over like that,' said Liz with a touch of concern.

'My back's got more spring in it than a young chicken. And don't forget to wipe your feet.'

Following the old man into his small, cosy living

room, Laura couldn't help feeling a touch of regret at the passing of the old gas mantles which she had loved to hear burning as a child. The gentle hiss was a familiar, comforting sound. Only five months ago electric light bulbs had taken their place. The cottage had finally been converted and brought in line with the very modern world of the sixties.

'Three sugars, innit, Liz?'

'Yes, Billy, and strong.' Liz sank back into the comfortable old leather armchair and kicked her shoes off, while Laura bent down beside the small Victorian fireplace and poked at the orange glow before adding a bit more coke.

'He'll never change, will he?' Laura chuckled.

'Let's 'ope not.'

'I think it's where our Kay gets her stubbornness from.'

'You reckon?' Liz chuckled knowingly.

Laura ignored that. She knew her sister-in-law well enough to take the meaning. 'Look at this, Liz. He's still putting crumbs out for that mouse.'

'Better than having a dog to feed. Cheaper.'

'Yeah, but what happens when the mouse has babies?'

'It won't!' her dad yelled from the scullery. 'She's a boy!'

'And how do you know that?'

'Mice 'ave been trying to set up 'ome in this cottage for years and I've managed to keep them down. I should know the difference by now!'

'That's put you in your place.' Liz closed her eyes.

'We'll see,' Laura said, settling herself in the other armchair. 'Mr Know-all's not always right.'

'Thought I'd 'ave a bit of liver and bacon for me dinner,' Billy said as he arrived with the small tray. 'You found yourself a chap yet, Liz, or what?'

'Dad!' Feeling acutely embarrassed, Laura eyed Liz for her reaction.

'Thought I might move in with you, Billy,' Liz teased, hiding the hurt. 'You can get a good tune from an old fiddle.'

Setting the tray down on a small wooden table, the old man laughed. 'Not me, girl. Too set in me ways. And Billy's willy's had it. I haven't had a bone in me dick for years.'

Liz roared with laughter while Laura could do nothing but shake her head, mildly disapproving. Leaving them to talk over old times, Laura went into the part-modernized scullery to peel some potatoes ready for her father to boil, and to toss the thick slice of lamb's liver in flour. Gazing round the scullery she felt a mixture of pride and sadness at the way the old man kept it. He still used the fuel-fired copper boiler to do his washing, and her mum's old mangle

to squeeze the water from his clothes. She couldn't knock it though, his tea towels were sparkling white and the smell of washing powder, bleach and starch reminded her of the old days when she was a child and helped her mother with the Monday wash. She hoped he would never get rid of the old washboard propped in the corner.

'At least you can rest in peace, Mum. He takes good care of himself,' she murmured.

'I tell you, Liz!' her dad was shouting now, and laughing. 'When I woke up in that ditch the next morning . . .'

They were talking about Liz's favourite subject – hop-picking. At least they had their stories. Machines might have ripped away the future for hop-pickers but they couldn't snatch back the wonderful memories.

Folding a tea towel over a wooden rail, Laura's mind was filled again with Richard. She remembered having counted up the few weeks of each year they were together; it amounted to just five months. They had only ever seen each other during the hop-picking season, since both were married and committed to their families. The end of hop-picking had meant the end of their affair.

Richard often moved in and out of her thoughts. Apart from her husband, Jack, he had been her only

love. And they had loved each other. Possibly still did. But their relationship had to be left to fade away, for everyone's sake. Especially Kay's. Guilt swept through Laura as her daughter's face now filled her mind. The time when she cried to Laura that she knew about the affair and how she didn't want her mum and dad to get divorced.

'Laura!' Liz's voice broke into her thoughts. 'Your dad wants me to take a trip over to France with 'im! Can I trust 'im, or what?'

Laura tried to smile, but it was impossible when her mind was on other things. Not that she didn't want to be with Jack – she did. They were all right now. Both had worked at getting back what they had before the marriage went on the rocks. But it wasn't the same as Richard, and she knew in her heart that it never would be. It seemed to Laura that emotions had a will of their own, and no matter how hard the fight, she couldn't change what happened by itself, inside.

'What's up now?' Liz took Laura by surprise as she stood in the doorway. 'You look as if you've lost two bob and found a penny.'

'I'm all right. Miles away.' She forced a smile. 'I'd best be getting on home. Jack'll be wanting his tea before he goes out to his meeting.'

'All right, Mog, you do that. I'll stop a bit longer, keep your dad company.'

Kissing her father lightly on the forehead, Laura squeezed his arm. 'Phone if you want anything, Dad, won't yer?'

'If I want anything, I'll walk round and ask you. I'm not using that contraption unless I 'ave to. Don't know why your Jack went to the expense of having it put in here in the first place. Just another bloody bill to think about.'

Laura folded her arms and stared him out until he finally gave in.

'All right, all right. If I don't feel well enough to come round, I'll use the bloody thing.' He looked up at his daughter's insistent face. 'Especially if I take bad in the night.'

'Good. That's what it's there for. I'll pop in after work tomorrow. Have your laundry ready for me to iron, OK?'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go on, get going. You should be there when your old man gets in from work.'

'From where?' Laura asked pointedly.

'Oh, right, I forgot. The strike. What's new?'

'Don't ask, Dad. I'm sick of hearing about it. One thing I do know, it's spreading fast. See you at work, Liz.' With that Laura left, closing the door quietly behind her.

As she walked along Cleveland Way, Laura mulled over Liz's words. *Lost two bob and found a penny.*

Little did her sister-in-law know how near to the mark she had been. Leaving Richard behind for Jack had felt a bit like that at the time. But the pennies were mounting up again, like the months that had passed. She half hoped that Richard would eventually fade from her mind altogether, leaving her free to love only those who were close to her.

Waves of guilt broke over her again. It wasn't fair on Jack that she should even be thinking about that time. He had done his utmost to make it up to her once they were back together. And he had turned out to be a good, caring husband. And loyal too.

Looking down from the makeshift platform at a meeting of dockers and speakers outside the gates of St Katharine's Dock, Jack was missing Bert's company and moral support. Some of the faces were familiar to him, but out of the hundreds of men there, he recognized only thirty or so from his own wharf. Blocking his emotions in order to deliver the rest of his speech, Jack tensed his body and clenched his fists.

'When they gave Bert's job to an outside man instead of a regular, they were doing no less than testing our strength! Over a dozen names were submitted and they chose one who just so happened

to be a casual worker! Coincidence? I don't think so! And as we all know, his wasn't the first job to go that way!

'That firm has over three hundred men on the permanent labour force! And this isn't the first time it's drawn on the casual labour pool for work!' He stopped for a breather while the men, aroused, yelled their own opinions on the subject.

'And now we hear rumours that the National Dock Labour Board has taken the decision that firms *may* use unregistered labour. Well, if that turns out to be the case, brothers, I vote the men in our wharf stay out until the decision is revoked!'

A loud cheer went up and the men raised their hands to show they would remain on strike. Bringing his speech to an end, Jack dropped his tone and spoke gravely.

'And for those few misguided anti-strikers who have been heard to say that I'm using Bert's death to attack the London Board, they are very much mistaken. When this dispute is over – and please God, may it be soon – and the London Port Employers have realized how wrong they were, then maybe we can say that something good did come out of something tragic, and Bert's death hasn't been a complete waste.'

A hush fell on the crowd as one by one they

removed their caps to show respect for a fellow docker.

Jack was pleased to see Kay as he strode along the Whitechapel Road on his way home from the meeting. She hadn't seen him, and he quickened his pace to catch her before she went into Lyon's coffee shop. He didn't dare call out for fear of embarrassing her, should there be a young man on the other side of the window she was peering into.

'All right, babe?' he playfully tapped her head with his folded newspaper.

'God, you scared the life out of me!'

Jack had been right; a quick glance into the shop and he could see young Pamela and a couple of boys inside. 'See you later,' he grinned, and walked on.

Checking her reflection, Kay pushed open the glass door and made her way towards the threesome.

'Coffee?' Tommy was quick off the mark.

'Please.' Kay remembered how she'd wished he was a bit taller when she first saw him.

'Cappuccino?'

'Prefer frothy coffee, if that's OK.'

Pamela started to giggle and tossed back her long, straight black hair. 'It's the same thing, Kay!'

Ray Charles's voice, on the juke box, broke through the embarrassing pause as he sang 'Hit the Road Jack'.

'Guess what I've got in my handbag?' Kay boasted.

'Can't be bothered.' Pamela pushed her fringe out of her eyes and made a point of not looking at Kay. She was irked about something, and Kay was in no doubt that she would let her know what it was once the boys had gone. She sat down and pushed her face up close to Pamela's.

'Think of a hot, sunny, sandy place – palm trees . . .'

'That's a lot to get in a little handbag!' Micky grinned.

'Two words: the first begins with "p" and the second with "f".'

Arriving with a steaming cup of coffee, Tommy started to laugh. 'A "p" and "f", eh?'

Before they started making crude guesses, Kay pulled a manila envelope out and waved it in Pamela's face. 'Passport form,' she grinned.

'It isn't!' she shrieked, shedding her sophistication. 'Honest?'

'Yep.'

'They said yes?'

'Not quite.'

'What d'yer mean, not quite? Either they did or they didn't!'

Kay shrugged. 'They didn't.'

Sitting back in her chair, Pamela pouted, sulking, and looked daggers at Kay. 'You're not funny.'

Leaning forward, Kay whispered to all three of them. 'I've got it down to a fine art now. I've been practising.' They waited. 'My dad's signature. I'm gonna forge it on to this very special visitor's passport form. And I went into the booth on Whitechapel station on my way here and got my snapshots done.'

'Let's 'ave a look then,' Tommy was making it clear just how keen he was on Kay.

Pulling them out of the pocket of her suede jacket, she passed them over without so much as a thought. Her mind was still on the passport form. 'So you can go ahead and book the tickets.' She sat back in her chair, sipped her coffee and winked at Pamela. 'Six weeks' time and we'll be sunning ourselves silly.'

'You can't do it, Kay,' Pamela shook her head.

'You watch me. This afternoon when Dad's at his strike meeting.'

'I mean it! You can't *do* it!'

'It doesn't matter what you say – it's as good as done.'

Looking at his watch, Tommy stood up. 'I'm gonna 'ave to go.' He passed the photographs back to Kay. 'Will you be in the Black Boy tonight?'

'No,' Pamela answered for her. 'The Beggar's. You get some good parties there.'

'Yeah. Good villains as well.' Tommy made it clear he wouldn't be going.

'How about the Prospect of Whitby?'

'Nar. Full of medical students.' He was having none of that.

'How about the Artichoke?'

'Sounds good to me,' Pamela chimed in.

'As long as we don't stay in there but go on to the Black Boy or the Two Puddings.'

'See you at eight,' Tommy said, smiling at Kay. The two boys strolled out as if they had all the time in the world.

'Thanks for flirting with Tommy.' Pamela was fuming.

'I never so much as showed a knee!' Pulling her mug shots out of the envelope, Kay was taken aback. 'Look at this! One's missing. Tommy must 'ave torn it off.'

There was a pause, and their eyes met, Pamela feeling jealous and Kay suddenly in the mood for love and romance.

'You're really gonna do it, then?'

'Yep. I've got my seven and six, my photographs and my form. I'm all set. Spain, here we come!'

Chapter Three

Liz was serving Bob, the fire officer, with a cup of tea and a cheese roll when Laura arrived looking flushed and unnerved.

'That'll be tenpence, love,' said Liz, giving Laura a quick once-over. 'What's up with you?' she asked, pressing a key on the till. 'Another snotty-nosed customer got under your skin?' She handed Bob the change and tut-tutted when he grabbed her hand playfully.

'Liz, ask one of the others to cover for you. I need to talk.'

'That bad?'

Laura couldn't answer; she was on the verge of tears. Dragging a chair out from under a table for two, she sat down and pulled a filter-tip cigarette from her packet and waited for Liz to join her.

'Try to hide your feelings a bit, Laura, for Christ's

sake. The world and all its children can see you're fuming about something.'

Laura sipped her tea and tried to compose herself. It wasn't going to be easy, confronting Liz, but it had to be done. She had to know right away whether her sister-in-law knew about the devastating secret that Jack had been keeping from her.

'Come on then,' Liz sniffed, 'spit it out. Who's upset yer?'

'Can't you guess?' Laura couldn't keep the spite out of her voice. 'Who's usually responsible for turning me inside out?'

Liz sighed. It had to be her brother Jack. Who else could bring out the worst in Laura? 'What's he done now?'

'*You* tell *me*.' She looked into Liz's eyes and waited.

'Tell you what?'

Laura drew a letter from the pocket of her red and navy blue dress and pushed it towards Liz. 'If you know about this, Liz, I would rather you said so. Please don't lie to me.'

While Liz slowly read through the letter, Laura talked quietly. 'I can't believe he's been keeping in touch with her all this time. I never made any demands. I just presumed he would put that part of his life out of his mind. Now I can't stop wondering

if he's been up there to see her; see their baby. Maybe he's waiting for the right time to tell me he wants to leave. Perhaps he's just been pretending he's happy with me, when all the time he's been making plans to leave once Kay's left the nest.'

'No, Laura! That's rubbish and you know it. He idolizes you. This was a serious mistake that he's still having to pay for.' Liz folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope. 'How would you feel if he *had* wiped her and the boy out of his life?'

'How did you know it was a boy? It doesn't say so in that letter.'

'Jack told me.'

Covering her face with both hands, Laura took a deep breath and willed herself not to cry. She hoped Liz wouldn't try to get her to speak. She needn't have worried, they had known each other long enough to realize when silence was sacred.

Laura finally came out from behind her hands and managed a weak smile. 'It hurts,' she said with a touch of bitterness.

'If I talk,' Liz said, 'are you up to listening, or shall we wait till the day's done and we can be private?'

'Wait. I'll come round to you after work. I'll leave cold ham and salad for Kay and a note to say where I am.'

'And Jack?'

Laura turned away, swallowed hard. 'I'll leave enough for him as well.'

'Good girl.' Liz squeezed Laura's hand. 'It'll all come out right, you'll see.'

Laura raised her eyes and looked into Liz's face. 'Two years he's kept this from me. Sharing something as important as a child with someone else. There's a lot to be put right, Liz. I thought that like me, Jack had stopped living lies.'

'This is a lie left over from the past, Laura. That's different. Just remember that the little boy didn't ask to be part of this. He's innocent. Probably the only innocent one in this drama. You played your part in it as well. While Jack was happy somewhere else it gave you a clearer conscience to, well, you know . . . Richard Wright?'

'I might have known I'd be held responsible!'

Chuckling, Liz picked up the empty cups and saucers. 'That's more like it. Anger's better than sorrow any day. See you later.'

Once Laura was back in her own department, with no customers to attend to, she pulled out the letter and read it again.

Dear Jack,

Just a line to say that the chickenpox has finally gone and we are having peaceful nights

again. Thank you for the postal order, it's a weight off of my mind to know that I can pay a month's rent in advance. My mother is still asking me to move in with her but I know it would never work; not while I have little Jac with me. Only last week she dropped hints about my having him adopted. She means well.

I have managed to get some piece-work, machining zips into men's trousers. At least it means I can work and look after the sprat at the same time, and it puts bread on the table. No other news. I don't get out much, but my mother's making inquiries about a second-hand television she knows will be coming up for sale. Some lucky sod will be buying an eighteen-inch set, no doubt.

There seems to be more work up here, for the men that is. Especially skilled builders and decorators. Everyone seems to be having small extensions built. All right for some. Tom will be coming to sit with me tonight. He's been very kind and I'm growing fond of him.

Try to get up here soon. We don't want you to lose touch with your boy, do we?

Write soon,

Patsy.

Laura shivered, thinking back to the time she first discovered that Patsy was carrying Jack's child. She couldn't help wondering if she should have kicked him out then. She wondered what her present life might have been like now, had she done so. At the time her main concern had been Kay. She hadn't wanted to put her through the trauma of her parents splitting up, filing for divorce. Maybe she had been wrong. Maybe Jack had spent the past two years wishing he was with this other woman.

'Mum?' Kay's voice echoed around Laura's thoughts as she sat hunched over the letter, choked, with tears in her eyes. 'You OK?'

Snapping out of her melancholy, Laura looked up and blinked. 'Kay! It *is* you. I thought I heard your voice.'

'Of course it's me.' She eyed the letter in Laura's trembling hands. 'Bad news?'

'No, not really. A letter from an old friend. I was swept away with nostalgia for a minute.' She slipped the letter back into her pocket. 'What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be at work?'

'I pretended I didn't feel well this morning. Mr Grieves finally condescended to let me go after lunch-time.'

'You did what?' Laura felt herself tense, gazing at

her one and only child who seemed to be maturing by the day. She found herself wishing she could turn back the clock and relive those times when chubby little Kay with blue eyes and blonde hair would nuzzle up to her and fall asleep on her breast.

'I had somewhere to go, Mum. And I've got something to tell yer.'

Kay's voice hadn't really changed that much, she just said things differently now. Informed Laura of things instead of asking permission.

'Promise you won't shout at me?'

'I promise, babe,' Laura said, knowing she didn't have it in her at that moment to shout at anyone. She pulled another chair up close to hers and motioned for Kay to sit down, hoping a customer wouldn't suddenly appear. Cupping Kay's face, Laura leaned forward and kissed her soft, flushed cheek and gave her a reassuring smile. Her daughter looked as if she had all the troubles of the world on her shoulders.

'I've done something that's, well, criminal, I s'pose,' Kay chewed the inside of her cheek and studied her mother's face for a reaction.

'Criminal, eh?' Laura stopped herself laughing.

'I had to do it, Mum. It was the only way. I've got to get out of this country.'

Laura felt herself go cold. 'You've got to what?'

'Oh, no, I don't mean . . . I haven't done anything that means I've *got* to get out. I've done something so that I *can* get out.'

Laura sank back in her chair. 'Oh, I wish you wouldn't do that to me, you little cow,' she murmured feeling somewhat relieved. 'I know what you've done. You've gone and got yourself a passport.'

Kay nodded slowly and swallowed hard. 'I had to do it. I feel like I'm suffocating. I need to get away. I need to feel some space around me.'

Laura stood up and paced the floor, one hand on her forehead. 'Kay, am I getting this right?' She looked her daughter straight in the eye. 'Did you sign your father's name on a passport form?'

Kay looked back sheepishly. There was no need for her to say anything.

'Terrific! And what do you think he's going to say about that?'

'Oh, we mustn't tell him! Not until I'm on the way and it's too late for him to stop me. I'm trusting you not to tell him!'

'Thanks. That's very good of you.' Laura sat down again. 'I wonder what else is in my stars today?'

'I won't ever tell Dad that you knew.'

'Oh, right.' Laura could hardly believe her ears. Kay was becoming an independent young lady.

Laura's thoughts went back to Jack's two-year-old son and her heart sank. She felt suddenly alone.

'I wouldn't have done it if it didn't mean so much to me, honest.'

'No, love,' Laura sighed, 'I can see that. When do you go?'

'In five weeks' time.'

'And where's the money coming from? Or am I supposed to pay for you to give me all this aggravation?'

'No. I've got a part-time job. Working in a sweet shop after work and at weekends.'

'And when did that come about?' Laura wondered what else had been going on while she had been day-dreaming.

'I've been looking for a job for ages.'

'And where is this sweet shop?'

'Islington.'

'Islington. You couldn't have got one locally, of course. That would have been too straightforward.'

'What's wrong with it? I work in Clerkenwell – it's just up the road!' Kay was beginning to lose her cool.

'Which will mean you catching a train late at night and at weekends!'

'It won't be late at night. I finish at half past eight and will be home before nine.'

'And what time does it get dark in April?'

'Oh, Mum, this is ridiculous! I'll be eighteen this summer!'

'It's north London, Kay. The Angel Islington's not the sort of place to be hanging around stations.'

'I won't be hanging around anywhere. I'll go to work, catch a train, come home. Simple.'

Laura felt much older than her thirty-nine years. 'OK,' she shrugged, hoping Kay would pick up on the note of weariness in her voice and lift her from the depths she was reaching.

'And you won't say anything to Dad about the passport?'

'No, I won't say anything,' she said, realizing she was hoping for too much. Kay was on a different plane.

'Good.' Kissing her mother on the cheek, Kay gave her a hug. 'Love you,' she said and hurried off.

Laura watched her go and wondered why she felt so depressed. Nothing terrible had happened. Not really.

'Do you have any Mary Quant dresses?' A girl, Welsh, probably a student, appeared before Laura.

'No, love, this store is a bit more conservative than that.'

'Don't you mean boring?'

'Yeah, boring. That's right. It does need to move with the times.'

The student agreed and left, as if an emotional, watery-eyed saleslady were part of everyday life.

'We all need to move with the times,' Laura murmured to herself. 'Things are on a roll all right. It's enough just keeping up.' She pulled the letter out of her pocket again and quickly put it back as a bubbly blonde approached, grinning from ear to ear. Not really paying much attention to the customer, Laura took a comb from her handbag and checked her appearance in a tiny mirror.

'I didn't know you worked in 'ere, Laura.' It was Milly, a friend she hadn't seen in months, years in fact.

Laughing, Laura put her comb and mirror away. 'You're marvellous, Milly, you know that?'

'Am I?'

'Yes. I was feeling a bit low to tell you the truth, and seeing you dressed up to the nines and looking as lively as ever is a real tonic.'

'Yeah? That's good. I was a bit naughty down 'opping, wasn't I? Trying to tease your Jack away.' She looked pensive. 'Never did work though, did it?'

'How's Georgie?' Laura was feeling better by the second

'Gets out next week. That's why I came in. Thought I'd buy a nice new coat to pick 'im up [illegible].'

'Is that how long they gave him?'

'Yeah. Bleeders. And all for what? A few bangle watches and a coupl'a dozen bottles of whisky. Still. I think it's taught 'im a lesson. He thought he was too clever to get caught. He had a good run before they did nab 'im, mind. He swears blind he's gonna go straight from now on.'

'Well, perhaps it was blessing, eh?'

'Yeah. Now, then, I fancy a nice camel coat with a bit of fox on the collar. Something like the one in the window. What d'yer reckon?'

'I've got just the thing. Expensive though.'

'That's all right. George 'ad a bit put by, if you know what I mean.' She grinned and winked at Laura.

'Oh, Milly,' Laura let out a throaty laugh, 'I am pleased to see you. You're one in a million.'

'Funny you should say that! It's what I used to think about you. Always wished I could be as classy. Where d'yer get it from, eh? You're just a common old East Ender, after all's said and done.'

Laura dropped her mirror back into her handbag and shrugged. 'That's me, all right.'

'Come on, then. Bring me a coat I can be proud to

walk down the Whitechapel Road in. I'll show some of them women out there that I can afford to shop in 'ammond's!'

Walking away from the store after closing time, Laura did her utmost to persuade Liz that she felt much better about the letter, that she didn't need to talk about it any more. But Liz in her wisdom thought Laura was just shelving it. 'If you don't talk to me about it, Laura, you'll bottle it up and explode at Jack at the wrong time.'

'No, Liz. I won't. I know what I'm doing, believe me. I'm gonna handle this my way.'

'Oh yeah?' Liz looked worried. 'And what way's that when it's at home?'

'Never you mind. Now then, you coming in to have a cuppa with Dad, or not?'

''Course I am. I need old Billy-boy to keep up my sense of humour.'

'All he ever does when *I* go in is moan.'

'Ah, well, you've either got the gift or you 'aven't. I bring out the devil in 'im.'

Unlatching the green gate into the tiny cul-de-sac, Laura smiled to herself. It was the effect Milly had had on her. She couldn't think why, but what did that matter as long as it worked and she felt lighter.

'What are you gonna do about the letter, then?'

'I'll tell you – once I've done it. Fair enough?'

'No. But I can see it's all I'm gonna get.'

'Spot on, Liz, spot on.' Laura knocked loudly on the cottage door and then used her own key to let them in.

'I'm not deaf!' yelled her dad from his place by the fire.

'See what I mean?' Laura shrugged and closed the door behind them.

'You got that kettle on yet, Billy, or what?'

'I have. And what's more, I've been out specially to get a bit of angel cake. And it wasn't cheap!'

As Liz pulled her coat off, Laura collected Billy's ironing, kissed her dad hallo and goodbye.

'Save me a bit of that cake!' she called over her shoulder as she made to leave.

'I dunno why you can't sit down for five minutes,' Billy called back. 'Always on the bloody go!'

'When they invent irons that work by themselves I will!' Laura shut the door behind her, pleased that each of them was filling a tiny gap in the other's life.

'The London Port Employers can urge all they like. It's like whistling in the wind as far as I'm concerned.' Jack was on his high horse again. 'We're in a strong position all right – and they know it. You

wait and see the turnout on Sunday. This'll be a mass march to remember.'

'I'm pleased it's going well.' Laura sounded sincere as she dished up some shepherd's pie and handed a plate to Jack.

'Are yer? Makes a nice change. So far you've done nothing but tell me how we shouldn't be making all this trouble for the country. What's changed your mind?'

'If that many men are willing to come out it must be for a good reason.' She piled processed peas on to his plate. 'I hate to think of those oranges and bananas rotting in the ships, though.'

'You think we don't? There has to be some losses. Stands to reason. Better a bit of fruit than a whole bloody industry.'

'I suppose the march on Sunday'll take up most of the day?' Laura asked, trying to sound casual.

'Oh, yeah. Bound to. Why?'

'Oh, nothing really. I was just thinking I might go and visit Fran. I've been promising to go ever since she moved out.'

'Harlow?' Kay said, getting herself a glass of water. 'That's miles away.'

''Course it's not. Anyway there's an early train. We'd have most of the day together, then I could catch one back somewhere around seven.'

'Wouldn't catch me going all that way for just a day's visit.'

Laura was sorely tempted to ask Jack why not, since Leicester was much further, but she bit her tongue and bided her time. 'It was just an idea. If you'd rather I didn't go—'

'Tch. 'Course you can go. I'll treat you to the fare as well. I was only thinking of you tiring yourself out. You're bound to wanna cook me something hot when you get in.'

'Always thinking of your stomach, eh, Dad?' Kay teased.

'Have some carrots,' Laura grinned, approaching him with a large spoon.

'Careful! Don't wanna get gravy over me clean shirt. I'm seeing the lads tonight in the Grave Maurice.'

'You're what?'

Jack wiped some gravy from the corner of his mouth. 'The Grave Maurice. What's wrong with that?'

'You never use that pub.' Laura felt her heart sink.

'Bert's brothers do. And they suggested we meet some of the other union leaders there. It's not a problem.'

'Bert always said he wouldn't step inside that

place. It's where the villains meet up, you know it is.'

'Oh shut up, Laura, you're talking about men we know. Frank and Freddie? What d'yer think they're gonna do, pull a gun? Tch. Villains!' He eyed her carefully. 'It's only a pub.'

Letting out a worried sigh, Laura began to eat her dinner. 'Haven't seen Bert's brothers for a couple of years, other than at the funeral. Right couple of spivs they looked as well.'

'You haven't dished any up for Kay.' Jack looked questioningly at his daughter.

'Me and Pamela's having pie and mash.' She pinched a carrot from his plate as she left the kitchen.

'Good. More shepherd's pie for us.' He winked at Laura, waiting for her to reach out and pick up the dish from the top of the gas oven. But she ignored him, and felt a wave of satisfaction when he finally got up without saying a word and got it himself. There was hope yet for her changing his Victorian attitude towards a woman and her work in the kitchen.

Spooning more hot food on to his plate, Jack looked suddenly pensive, and Laura wondered if he was thinking about his small son. She could feel herself sinking again.

'They're gonna be debating this strike in the 'Ouse of Commons, you know.'

Relieved that she was wrong about his thoughts, Laura poured herself some water from the pink glass jug. 'You have to expect that, Jack. It's turning into a serious unofficial strike now. Everyone's talking about it. I heard a couple of blokes in the canteen saying that you'll never get the government behind you on this one.'

'We'll see. The longer we stay out, the deeper in trouble this government'll be. They know that. They're testing us, see how far we're prepared to go.'

'And?'

'How far? Until they give in. We're not just talking about a little dispute, Laura. We're talking about the future of dockers and the docks.' He sat down, picked up his fork, then pushed his plate away. 'I've lost me appetite thinkin' about it.'

Laura had never seen him like this before, and had a nagging feeling it was because he and the men were in a no-win situation. They might even have walked straight into a political plot to weaken the union. And if Laura's mind was working that way, she knew for sure that Jack's would be too.

'Bert's brothers aren't gonna get involved in this dispute, are they?'

Jack looked back at her, a reassuring smile on his face. 'They're probably already involved, Laura. People like me and the other union leaders are just spokesmen, if the truth be known. This country's run by villains and corrupt politicians.'

'You are joking?'

'Yeah. 'Course I'm bloody joking.' He winked at her. 'Don't suppose you fancy a cuddle on the sofa before I go out?'

'Too early in the day. You can wake me up when you get in tonight though.' She was surprised to find herself flirting with him. She thought they had been married too long for all that. There was no doubt in her mind that the letter she had found in his jacket pocket, before she sent it to the cleaners, had aroused a bit of jealousy.

Leaning forward in his chair, Jack reached out and caught her as she passed and landed a big kiss on her small round buttock. 'I fancy you rotten,' he grinned.

'Make sure you're home early then.' She tweaked his ear and made a sharp exit.

Standing in a short queue at the ticket office on Sunday morning, Laura began to have doubts about the trip she was embarking on. Up to now she had had her sights firmly fixed on seeing the woman and

Jack's illegitimate son; to find out for herself what she was like and just how deep the relationship was. Had she confronted Jack, she felt sure he would have lied to get himself off the hook.

She pushed her left foot further into the new shoe, trying to ease the blister that was developing on her heel. Pointed toes might look good but they were murder to get used to. Brushing a dust mark from her bottle green skirt, she wondered if the costume she had chosen was a bit too smart. Maybe she should have worn something a bit more casual. Slacks even.

She started to wonder about her dark auburn hair that tumbled down around her shoulders. Shouldn't she have swept it up into a topknot?

'A day return to Leicester please,' she heard herself say, as if part of her had decided to take the lead. Another part wanted to run back home and forget the whole business. In her heárt, though, she knew that this was not something to be put off. She had found herself thinking about it every spare minute, and a night hadn't passed since she found the letter when it hadn't crept into her sleep, giving her nightmares.

Sitting on the platform waiting for the train, Laura glimpsed the headlines on someone's newspaper, *Docker's Strike Halts Exports!*

Even though it was a national issue, she felt sure it wouldn't be long before the newspapers would home in on the human interest stories. Bert's name would be spread across the front pages of the local rags, at least. She dreaded to think what it would do to Liz.

'Who'd 'ave thought it, eh?' The elderly woman sitting on the bench next to Laura grinned at her. 'Working classes holding the country to ransom. About bloody time as well. Good luck to them boys, that's what I say!'

Laura found herself smiling back at the stranger and wondering what she *would* say if she knew just how involved her family were. 'Is your husband a docker?' she asked instead.

'No, love. He's six foot under. Used to be a coalman. He was good an' all. A grafter. More's the pity. The pay was lousy and the work was hard. Humping coal on his back non-stop, and for what? To end up with 'is lungs full of black dust.' She folded her newspaper and placed it on her lap. 'I wouldn't mind if he got a bit of respect for the hard work and hours he put in. Still, there you are. That's a working man's lot, innit?'

Laura shrugged and sighed. What could she say? Pushing open the gold-coloured clasp of her handbag, she pulled out a bar of Fry's chocolate cream and an Aero. 'Which one d'yer fancy?'

The woman's face lit up. 'Wouldn't mind a small section of that Aero. It's my favourite.'

'Here, take it. I'm watching my weight.'

'Ta, love. I won't say no in that case. Mind you, lovely figure like yours.'

'Ah, but, it wouldn't be if I ate as much chocolate as I would like!'

'True.'

Feeling lighter inside, Laura watched as other trains pulled into other platforms, enjoying the hustle and bustle of King's Cross.

'Where you off to, then?' the woman carefully peeled back the wrapper and then the gold paper.

'Visiting an old school friend who's moved up to Leicester,' Laura lied. 'You?'

'Oh, I'm not going nowhere, love. Waiting for my daughter and grandchildren. They come every Sunday. We go over the park and 'ave a picnic. Her old man left 'er for someone else.'

Laura popped a piece of chocolate into her mouth and imagined herself being a grandmother. She tried to visualize Kay with a baby in her arms and maybe a little one pulling on her skirt. Then she remembered why she was there waiting for a train. There seemed to be no let-up to the constant reminder of her personal anxieties.

Stepping out of Leicester railway station, Laura

found herself face to face with two placards on either side of the newspaper seller. The scrawled headline on one was *Gunfire As East Germans Attempt Escape Over Berlin Wall*, and on the other, *More London Dockers Out!* There seemed to be no escape. Approaching the smiling face of a flower seller, Laura asked for directions to St David's Road.

'Taxi or walking?' The woman wrapped a bunch of daffodils and handed them to a customer.

'Walking,' Laura wondered why she had asked. If she had intended to go by taxi, surely the driver would know the way. 'If it is walking distance, that is,' she asked carefully.

'Along London Road, left into Evington Road, left into East Park, about half a mile on, past Spinney Park, left into St Saviour's, up the hill, past the Imperial Hotel and then,' she looked up at the sky thoughtfully. 'Then you'd best ask again. It's somewhere around that way. Big houses. Split into flats.'

'Thanks. I'll take a mixed bunch, please.'

'You can remember all that, can you?' The woman sounded surprised.

'Left, left and left; Evington, East Park and St Saviour's,' Laura confirmed.

'That's one way of looking at it. Two bob, love.'

Laura passed over the coin and thanked the woman again.

'Taxi won't cost you much, love. Otherwise it's gonna take you a good half an hour.'

'That's OK. I'm in no rush.' Turning away Laura found herself smiling. She suddenly realized what it was about the woman that had attracted her attention. 'You're a Londoner!' she called back.

'Too right. I was evacuated up here and never bothered to go back. Married a taxi driver!' She nodded towards the black cab parked a few yards away. Her husband was in the driving seat, sound asleep. A certain smile flickered between the two women.

'Business is quiet,' she shrugged.

Showing a hand, Laura walked away feeling more comfortable about being in a strange town. Leicester wasn't a bit like she had imagined. It reminded her very much of London south of the river. For some reason she had pictured it being a small grey town instead of the lively place it was.

Deep in thought, rehearsing over and over what she would say to Patsy when she opened the door, Laura almost missed her third left turning and was halfway across the road when she realized, stopping suddenly and causing a young man behind to bump into her. Feeling like an idiot, she quickly made her way towards St Saviour's Road and stepped up her pace as she walked uphill towards the beautiful

Victorian Imperial Hotel, but slowed down again when the three-faced clock on the bell tower struck the hour. Again she was reminded of London, and Big Ben.

On a wild impulse, she stepped into the hotel entrance, her heart beating nineteen to the dozen, and followed the sign to the lounge bar. Once inside she felt like turning away. It was mostly men, and the women there all had male partners. Bracing herself, she walked with her head held high to the bar, a confident, serene smile fixed on her face, and asked for two gin and tonics.

'My husband will be joining me in a minute,' she said, taking her purse from her handbag.

'That's quite all right, madam.' The barman took her by surprise as he made it clear that money need not pass between them. 'If you'd care to tell me your room number and name, I'll put it on your bill.'

'But we haven't registered yet,' Laura smiled, wondering how she would get out of this one. 'Just in from London. My husband's parking the car.'

'The name will be fine, madam.'

'Thank you. It's Mr and Mrs Smyth-Winter.' Where that fictitious name came from she had no idea, but she liked the sound of it, and surprised herself at how easily she slipped into the part.

'If madam would like to take a seat.'

'Thank you, yes.' Laura looked around her and spotted a small round table in a corner not far from the door. She could make a quick escape when he wasn't looking.

With a mixture of excitement and trepidation, Laura settled herself and idly turned the pages of the complimentary copy of *The Times* which had been left neatly folded on the table. Again a headline hit her: *Unofficial Dock Strike: Minister Against Intervention.*

Reading with interest, she hardly noticed the two gin and tonics being placed carefully before her. 'Would madam care for ice and lemon?'

'Thank you.' She stopped herself laughing as the waiter gracefully tonged ice cubes into each glass.

'I hope you enjoy your stay.' He smiled and walked away, balancing the small silver tray on fingers and thumb.

Gazing at the drinks, Laura wondered whether to finish one and leave, making it look as if she were on her way to the Ladies', or go for the kill and drink both. She took out a cigarette and decided to see how it went. If the lounge bar continued to fill up, she could easily go unnoticed and enjoy what would amount to a double. She certainly needed it. Not caring whether it was correct for women to smoke in that part of the country, she lit a cigarette, thankful

for the mock tortoiseshell lighter that Liz had given her. The usual box of matches would never do. Not in these smart surroundings.

'I say, is this seat taken?'

Laura looked up from her newspaper into the bleary eyes of a grey-haired man with a huge handlebar moustache. 'Not at the moment, but it will be.' She tried to sound polite in case his intentions were honourable.

'I was about to join you.' He spoke as if he were doing her a favour.

Having finished one gin and tonic and not really in the mood for another, she was relieved that the intoxicated gentleman swaying before her had given her the best possible excuse to leave.

Dropping her cigarettes and lighter into her handbag, she threw the man a look and walked with dignity out of the bar. Once in the street she quickened her pace, terrified in case someone came after her.

Pushing one hand into the pocket of her costume jacket, she withdrew a crumpled piece of paper with Patsy's address scrawled on it. Having come from one embarrassing situation in the hotel she felt easier, somehow, at going into another. Not that her stomach wasn't churning, but at least the palpitations that kept coming and going on the train had eased off.

When she finally arrived at Patsy's door, Laura

felt her heart lurch. She stood for a moment, wondering whether she should turn back, when the sound of a child's cry weakened her. Before she knew it, her finger was on the bell-push clearly marked Flat 1.

Standing in the doorway with the young boy in her arms, Patsy's face was full of surprise as she gazed into Laura's. Neither of them said anything until the child grinned and pointed a chubby finger at Laura's black and gold brooch.

'Mummy's,' he said. There were still tears on his cheeks.

Unable to think of anything to say, Laura turned her attention to Jack's son. 'Why was he crying?' she said, feeling self-conscious.

'Fell over. Bump!' The child answered for Patsy.

'You'd best come in,' she said quietly, standing aside. 'In there.' She nodded towards a cream-coloured door.

Lifting the little boy into his play-pen, Patsy gave him a biscuit, which brought a smile to his face. Then she added a few toys which were spread around the floor. 'You can take your jacket off. I won't steal it,' Patsy joked.

'I'm not stopping.' Laura felt a pang of jealousy as the two-year-old looked up at her with Jack's blue eyes.

'No mistaking whose boy he is,' Laura smiled

weakly. Then turning away to hide the pain, she stared out of a large Victorian window. 'You knew who I was the moment you saw me.'

'Oh, Jack's very proud of his family. He's shown me photographs. A reminder, I suppose, that he's not free to come and go as he might like.'

'Jack is free to do what he wants, and don't kid yourself otherwise,' Laura hit back. Any compassion she felt when Patsy first opened the door was slipping away, and there was nothing she could do to stop her anger rising again, or unwelcome tears welling up in her eyes.

'So what brings you here, then, after all this time?'

'I don't know,' Laura said, turning to face her rival, not caring that the tears were now trickling down her cheeks. 'I wish I could say something sensible.' She wiped her face with the back of her hand. 'I hadn't bargained on the waterworks.'

'Here.' Patsy took a clean white handkerchief from a pile of ironing on the sideboard and pushed it into Laura's hand. 'You've got some pluck, I'll give you that. Many's the time I've wanted to knock on your door.'

'Why?' Laura composed herself, determined to maintain a level of dignity.

'Tell you about me and Jack.'

'You didn't have to. I already knew. I was waiting for it to blow over.'

Patsy gave a burst of mock laughter. 'And look what blew in before it "blew over".' She half turned so that Laura could have a full view of the small boy.

While Patsy was in the adjoining tiny kitchen, Laura looked around at her spotless, simply furnished room. It was obvious that she wasn't too strapped for cash. Little Jac was dressed in a clean, pale blue knitted suit and it was obvious from the pile of ironing on the sideboard that he had plenty of clothes and a grandmother, probably, who was very good at knitting.

'Does Jack often send you money?' Laura felt like biting her tongue. She hadn't meant it to come out quite like that.

Arriving with two cups of tea, Patsy shrugged. 'He does what he can. If I had my way I wouldn't take anything.'

'He should send you money. It's only right.'

'Are you going to sit down, then?' Patsy had a way of making an invitation sound like an order.

Laura peeled off her jacket, threw it on to the back of an armchair, and sat on the edge of the cushion. 'I found a letter in Jack's pocket. I was getting some clothes ready for the cleaner's. I wasn't looking for it. It came as quite a shock.'

'Why? You knew Jack had got me pregnant: at least he said he'd told you, when you were in Kent.'

'He did, I just didn't think.' Laura sighed and hung her head. 'I suppose I just buried my head in the sand. It stands to reason he wouldn't have just left you to . . .' Laura's voice trailed off.

'So what's your problem, then? I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to spend five minutes with Jack's little bastard.'

'I didn't come to make trouble.' She looked into Patsy's big brown eyes and felt a wave of guilt. 'I'm not angry any more, and I don't blame you.'

'Maybe you should. I knew what I was doing. I wanted his child.' She looked down at little Jac playing happily. 'Funny little bugger, isn't he?'

'And what about your feelings towards Jack?' Laura dreaded the answer, fearing the worst.

'I still admire him – got great shoulders.' She sipped her tea. 'I do have a boyfriend. My love for Jack soon faded. I would like my son to know his father. But that's asking too much, I suppose?' She eyed Laura carefully.

'Yes. I think it is.' There was a pause. 'It has to be all or nothing with me, none of this family sharing. It's not right.'

'Well, I don't want Jack any more, and he never did want me, not for a wife, that is.'

They sat there, quietly drinking their tea, eyes down. The only sounds came from Jac, content to sit and pick the chocolate chips out of his biscuit.

'My mother lives just around the corner,' said Patsy finally. 'I was about to get Jac ready to go round there for Sunday dinner. She always feeds us Sundays.'

'I'd best be going then. She'll be expecting you.'

'Yes, she will. I'm sorry you've had a wasted journey.' Patsy's tone was very cool. 'Waste of a train ticket.'

'No, I don't think it was.' Laura stood up and reached out for her jacket. 'I'll see that Jack sends you a regular amount of money.'

'That's very charitable. I must say I wouldn't be as soft. But then Jack's not the sort who needs his wife's permission to feed and clothe his own son, is he?'

'Of course it's a bit difficult at the moment, with the strike. But once it's over, he'll make up for the months.'

'That's a very nice costume. Looks classy. Expensive. And that brooch, by the way, is identical to one he gave me three years ago. Must have been a job lot.'

Laura felt the tears well up again. She pressed her lips together and composed herself. 'Look, I'm sorry if you've had a rough time.'

'Like I said, I've got a boyfriend. But he refuses to take on someone else's kid. Especially a southerner's. Can't blame him. So there we are. That's the fine mess your husband's got me into.'

'But you said it was your doing,' Laura whispered, realizing she had pushed Patsy too far when she saw her cheeks redden with anger.

'Oh, yeah,' she grinned, 'I forced him to have sex with me, if you can believe that.' She shook her head. 'Jack made love to me more times than you've given him a hot dinner! The fact that he was too drunk to care one night, when he didn't have something with him, is neither here nor there.'

'I've made things worse by coming.' Laura's stomach turned over.

'No. I don't think so. Hasn't affected *me* one way or the other, to be perfectly honest.'

'You seemed relieved to meet me when I first came.'

'I was.' She smiled serenely. 'I used to dread you coming after me, when I was in London having the affair with Jack. I was terrified of you. We can blame Jack for that.' She tossed her ginger curls off her face. 'And now I'm not. And you know why? Because I've got his son – and you haven't.' She was still smiling.

Laura could do nothing but look at Patsy's face,

waiting for some sign of remorse, regret, maybe a little shame?

'That's right,' Patsy grinned spitefully, 'I've got a son and you haven't.' She spoke the words slowly, deliberately.

'Please don't say that.' Laura could feel the old hurt moving back into her chest. 'You don't know what you're saying.'

'I do, actually. I heard nothing else for bloody years! That sacred child you lost. Well my boy is alive and kicking and needs clothes on his back. So it's useless coming at me with all that self-pity.'

'God, you are one strange woman.' Laura managed to regain her self-respect.

'I don't want to seem rude, but . . .' Patsy looked at her watch, 'especially after you've come all this way.'

Grabbing her handbag, Laura made for the door, and turned to Patsy. 'Your son is the image of my daughter. Except for the ginger hair. But still, maybe that will lighten as he gets older.'

'Maybe. I'll get Jack to keep you informed.'

Jack settled himself in a quiet corner of the Grave Maurice and wondered what he would be having for dinner that day. He had got it wrong about the strike meeting, it was a three o'clock start, so he had time

to spare. Maybe he and the boys would go off for something to eat once they'd had a couple of beers and a chat.

Not much had been said the night before, not by Bert's brothers in any case. They had been content to sit back and listen to Jack's opinions about the strike and his plans, throwing the occasional question his way. He undid a small knot of blue paper and shook salt into his bag of potato crisps.

'What you drinking, Jack?'

'Hallo, mate, I didn't see you come in. A pint'll do me.' Jack swallowed the remains of a beer in one go.

'Laura get off all right?' The immaculately dressed Frank sat down opposite Jack and motioned to his brother, who was standing at the bar, that both he and Jack would have a pint and a chaser.

'Yeah. Though why she wants to travel all that way to spend a few hours chin-wagging, beats me.'

'Nice part of the world, Suffolk.'

'Essex,' Jack corrected.

'What's the difference? Coupl'a miles?'

'Think so, yeah.'

'Well we won't argue about that, then.'

Jack had no intention of arguing about anything, not with either of Bert's younger brothers. They had changed quite a bit since the time when Jack taught

them to make paper aeroplanes, way back in 1938 when he was nineteen and they were seven and nine. He suddenly found himself wondering what kind of a mood Frank was in. He felt distinctly uncomfortable and wasn't sure why.

'How's Liz coping?' Frank asked, trying to sound interested.

'Seems OK, Frank. Likes her job in the canteen.'

'Good.' Slipping a hand inside his jacket, he pulled out a thick white envelope. 'Give this to 'er for me, will yer? Say it's from me and Freddie.'

'Oh, right.' Jack tucked the envelope into his pocket.

'That should see her right for a while.' Frank sat back in his chair with an air of pride and satisfaction.

Setting the drinks down on the table, the second brother nodded at Jack. 'All right, mate?'

'Yeah. Not bad.' He swallowed some of the beer and had a strange feeling he was going to need the chaser.

Moving along the bench so that Freddie could sit next to him, Frank began to stroke one of his thick black eyebrows. 'So, Jack . . . another meeting this afternoon, eh?'

'Yep. Should be quite a turnout.'

'Mmmm.' Frank sniffed and drank some of his beer, leaving a silence.

'There are some people, Jack,' Frank said, his face expressive, 'top-notch people, that is, who are not very happy about this strike. They seem to think it's all getting a bit out of hand.'

'Nothing wrong with that, is there? Should be good publicity.'

The brothers looked at each other, showing their mutual disapproval in the nicest way possible, with a half-smile.

'It's getting a little bit embarrassing – for us, that is. A couple of Members of Parliament are a bit put out as well.'

'Oh yeah?' Jack waited to hear what was on their minds.

'Letters and parcels bound for places like Argentina, East Africa, they're stuck in sorting offices. Not to mention other exports and imports, come to that. The Dock Labour Board ain't backing yer; and I hear that other unions think it's all a bit out of order.'

'Come to the meeting this afternoon and you'll see. Hear what the men 'ave got to say.'

'Yeah, but that's not really the point, is it, Jack?' Frank said, trying to keep a friendly tone. 'You've got the warehouse keepers up in arms. They've invested a lot of money increasing exports.'

'Ah, now we're getting there,' Jack said knowingly. 'Some of them warehouse keepers are friends of yours, I take it?'

'Colleagues. And not so much mates of ours, as Management.'

'I thought you boys were freelance?' Jack smiled, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

'Everyone has to answer to someone.' Freddie downed half his glass of beer. 'Can't have too many chiefs.'

'And us red indians don't do so bad,' Frank chimed in.

Suppressing his anger, Jack leaned his head to one side and looked the thirty-year-old in the eye. 'What's this about, Frank?'

'Don't ask,' he said, slowly shaking his head and smiling. 'It's far too complicated.'

'The thing is,' Freddie the fair-haired brother added, 'we definitely don't want our Bert's name spread across the newspapers. And we don't want him used any more for other people's ends.'

'That's never been the case!' Jack snarled. 'And you fucking well know it!'

'Come on, Jack boy, don't be like that,' Freddie said, lighting a cigar.

'I'll be any way I like! And not so much of the boy. I gave you a cuff round the ear sixteen years ago

when you was a small fry. Don't think I wouldn't do it again.'

The two brothers looked at each other and raised an eyebrow, hoping to undermine Jack.

'Do you two realize how important this dispute is? Have you any idea what could happen to the docks if we sit back and let them bastards do what they want?'

'Jack, Jack, Jack.' Freddie paused and blew smoke rings towards the ceiling. 'You can't stop progress. This is the sixties, not the thirties. New roads are planned. Containerization's on the cards. Bringing stuff in and out of the country through the docks'll be history. Another decade and they'll be flying it all in and out by aircraft as big as your smaller ships. And that'll only be the start.' He drew on his cigar again. 'You're bashing your 'ead against a brick wall, mate.'

'I can't believe I'm hearing this.' Jack felt choked and angry. Downing his whisky in one go, he stood up without saying a word. As he turned to leave, Freddie grabbed his arm. 'Keep Bert's name out of it, eh?'

'I think it might be a bit late for that.'

'It's never too late, Jack boy.' His smile was full of threat. 'Not if you've got a brain, that is.'

Jack scowled and pulled his arm away. He stormed

out of the pub, full of revulsion. As he marched along the Whitechapel Road he realized that Bert's brothers had changed quite a bit in the last seven or eight years since he used to drink with them regularly. He had often wondered why they had slipped out of the local social scene. Now he knew. The mohair suits, the thick gold bracelets, the new Jaguar, it added up. They moved in the world of hardened criminals now, and he had to admit that he might regret it if Bert's brothers became his enemies.

Passing the Blind Beggar, where some of his docker friends drank, Jack felt a strong desire to go in and let off steam. He walked straight past instead, and turned left into Cambridge Heath Road on his way to Liz's small terraced house in Bethnal Green. She would give him dinner and he could get rid of the envelope in his pocket. He felt like hurling it over a wall, but guessed that it might be more than his life was worth. And besides, why shouldn't Liz have some of their ill-gotten gains?

Nodding to a passing neighbour, Jack realized he was shivering, not from the crisp April day, but with the mild shock of knowing that he could be under threat from people more powerful than Bert's two flashy younger brothers.

Turning into Columbia Road he considered the

idea of emigrating. Maybe that would satisfy Kay's wanderlust! Arriving at Liz's door, he braced himself to face that living room with the brown fireside chair empty, where Bert should have been.

''Course I was expecting you!' Liz made her way along the narrow passage, Jack closing the door behind him. 'I heard the meeting wasn't till this afternoon and what with Laura goin' off to Harlow, I guessed you'd be round for a bit of Sunday dinner.'

Sitting down by the glowing gas fire, Jack warmed his hands and felt distinctly better now that he was in familiar surroundings, with the sound of the wireless in the background and the smell of roast beef drifting through from the kitchen.

'Where's the Sunday paper?'

'On my bed! I went back with it and a cup of tea this morning. It was bliss, I tell yer. A bit of luxury I should have allowed myself before now!'

'Why didn't yer? Bert wouldn't 'ave minded.'

'I know that. I just didn't, that's all. Wouldn't 'ave dreamed of it. Had to get the worker's breakfast, didn't I?'

'Leave off, Lizzie. Had to? You loved running round 'im and you know it.'

'I'm glad to see those two little sods didn't worry you too much.' Liz sat in the other armchair and

slowly shook her head. 'Bert used to love them boys. His baby brothers. Then they grew up into what they are now.'

'I'm not with you.' Jack couldn't see how she could possibly know about their little meeting.

'Wheels travel faster than legs, Jack.'

'Are you telling me those bastards came round here?'

'As soon as you left the pub.'

Jack sipped the tea Liz had put down in front of him. 'They're way out of order. Who do they think they're dealing with, eh? Don't they think I've got contacts? One phone call is all it'd take and they'd get a bloody good 'iding.'

'I think you're gonna 'ave to drop it, you know.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Take a back seat. Let someone else take the lead. You don't know the sort of people Bert's brothers mix with now.'

'The people they'd like to mix with, you mean! They're all mouth.'

Liz put her cup and saucer on the radiogram next to her and stood up. 'I'd best turn that meat over,' she murmured. She couldn't bring herself to tell her brother just how serious the situation was, and how important the message delivered by the two men.

'So they came to see you 'oping you'd talk me round?'

'Something like that, yeah.' Liz walked back into the kitchen.

Jack remembered the white envelope in his pocket and it made him feel confused. Maybe it wasn't out of the goodness of their hearts that they were treating Liz, nor out of respect for Bert. Looking down at the envelope he could see it hadn't been sealed and, as he pushed it open with his thumb, that it was crammed full with grubby five- and ten-pound notes. He reckoned there had to be three hundred quid in total. It was becoming very clear that while the boys held an invisible gun in one hand, aimed at Jack's head, the other was offering a financial settlement.

While Liz busied herself in the kitchen throwing vegetables into boiling water, Jack stared into the fire, working out the best way to handle the situation. He could, without too much loss of face, slip into the background and let the other union leaders rule the waves, or try to. He had a perfect excuse. He could say the constant reminder of losing Bert so suddenly, and his name being thrown about the way it had been, was proving too much for his family. Or that his sister was living in fear of the press knocking on her door. Or, better still, he could say she was

scared that her innocent Bert had become the cause of a widespread national strike.

A loud ring at the door startled Jack and for a second or two he felt genuinely scared. Shaking himself, he called to Liz that he would answer it.

'It'll be our Kay!' she called out.

'Will it?' Jack felt relieved and pleased. He hadn't seen much of his daughter since the strike had started and he was missing her. What he hadn't expected was to see Kay in tears and looking angry.

Settling her on the sofa, Jack took the small glass of brandy Liz offered and swallowed it in one go.

'That was meant for Kay!' Sometimes Liz couldn't believe her brother. 'That's typical, Jack, that really is.' She could see Kay found it amusing.

'It's all right, aunt Liz. I don't need a drink. I'm probably overreacting.'

'What d'yer mean, Kay, overreacting? About what?' It pained Jack to see his girl in tears, even if they were from frustration rather than grief.

'You'll only get annoyed if I tell yer.'

Sighing, Jack pushed his hand through his thick blond hair. 'I won't get annoyed, all right?'

Kay blew her nose and took a deep breath. 'Someone just shouted abuse at me.'

Liz and Jack waited patiently while she composed

herself. 'You didn't walk out in front of a car again, did yer?' Liz asked.

'No. 'Course not. I only did that once before, aunt Liz, and I was nine!'

'You frightened the life out of everyone around yer, including the poor driver,' Liz said, remembering.

'Yeah. And everyone screamed at me for being careless.'

'Never mind all that now,' Jack put his arm around Kay's shoulder, 'who's upset yer?'

'Promise you won't ask who she was?'

'I know 'er then, do I?' Jack spoke before he thought.

'See! You're interrogating me already!'

Liz caught his eye, her expression daring Jack to lose his rag. He shrugged and said he was sorry.

'That's all right,' Kay murmured. 'Just give me a minute.'

They sat waiting for the silence to end, having no idea what was coming next. Liz looked as if she were trying to suppress a giggle, and Jack noticed. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the floor to avoid looking at his sister, knowing how easily they could both lose control at the amusing side of this scene.

'Someone just yelled and swore at me. Said it was my family's fault that she wouldn't be roasting a joint

today but making do with vegetables and Yorkshire. She said that Mum should try living on strike pay with six mouths to feed.' Kay lowered her voice, her head bent. 'She said you was happy to see the strike go on, so long as Mum and me kept you.'

'Did she now?' Jack spoke quietly, turning his head away so that neither she nor Liz could see his shame-filled face. He felt as if the mud was being hurled from all directions. He couldn't understand it. If he was doing something underhand, that would be different – but fighting for rights? He inhaled slowly as it dawned on him that when it came down to it, all he really wanted now was a quiet, uncomplicated life.

'Sorry, Dad. I should 'ave kept it to myself.'

'No,' Jack shook his head, 'you did the right thing. Next thing we know, they'll be cursing Bert's name.'

Taking Jack and Kay by surprise, Liz's sudden cry filled the room and she trembled from head to toe. Unable to control herself, she cried out, over and over, for Bert. Jack and Kay could do nothing but watch helplessly as she sobbed and rocked to and fro, grieving for the man they loved and missed, and the situation that had developed after his death. It seemed to be affecting all their lives.

After eating Sunday lunch in a less than happy mood, Liz, Jack and Kay curled up by the gas fire, watching television, and one by one fell asleep.

There had been a debate which almost turned into an argument over which programme they would have on. The FA Cup special, Burnley versus Tottenham, was on at ten minutes past two, and ran through Liz's favourite programme on the other side, *Interpol Calling*. Liz had argued that since the football was a repeat from the day before and she knew full well that Jack wouldn't have missed it, they should switch over for *Interpol Calling*, switch back to football once that was over, and then see her favourite actor in *The Big Steal*. There wasn't much Jack could say; she had laid down the law, arguing that since it was her house she would watch what she wanted. As it happened, it was exactly what Jack wanted too. He was astute when it came to his elder sister, who had been more like a mother to him since their parents died when he was a boy.

Stretched out on the sofa, Jack's low snoring drifted through the room, and it was a miracle that the vibrations hadn't woken either Kay or Liz who were fast asleep in the worn, feather-cushion armchairs. None of them had intended to sleep for so long, and when the doorbell pierced their slumber, they were

surprised to see that it was nearly seven o'clock and the sun was going down.

Easing herself out of her armchair, Liz steadied herself before walking along the narrow passageway. She knew that at her age it was unwise to rush about after a doze.

'Just woke up, Liz?' Laura could see she had.

'Bloody blimey,' Liz said, 'you're all here now. Shut the door behind yer.'

Laura followed Liz into the sitting room and could see at a glance that they had all been sleeping. 'Looks like I'm the only one awake enough to put the kettle on,' she joked.

Dropping back into her chair, Liz nodded. 'Couldn't agree more.'

'How did the meeting go then, Jack?' Laura called from the kitchen.

'Dunno. I missed it.' He pulled out his tobacco tin and pushed the lid off with his thumb.

'You did what?' She stood in the doorway, kettle in hand.

'I got it wrong. It wasn't this morning. It was this afternoon, and I fell asleep after my dinner.'

Liz knew why Jack hadn't gone to the meeting, but Kay looked puzzled. Her dad was lying and she knew it. He hadn't fallen asleep when he said he had.

'How's Fran settling down in Harlow, then?'

'She's OK, Jack. D'yer mind if I make myself a cold meat sandwich, Liz? I'm starving.'

''Course not. Help yourself. Do you want one, Kay?'

'No thanks, aunt Liz. Wouldn't mind another piece of that apple pie, though, with cream.'

'Well go and help yourself then. Don't leave it all to your mother.'

Once Kay was safely out of earshot, Liz leaned forward and spoke to Jack in a low voice. 'Why don't you sit down quietly tonight and tell Laura about Frank and Freddie? You won't be able to hide the fact that you're pulling out of the fight.'

'I'm not gonna pull out, Lizzie. I'll step down as spokesman, that's all.' He stood up and stretched. 'That sleep's done me good. I've got a clear head about it now.' He pulled his braces up over his shoulders. 'Anyway, I've said all I've got to say. Won't be a bad thing to let someone else have a go. Be all right if I 'ave a wash and shave?'

Liz looked up at her brother and shrugged. 'I suppose so,' she said thoughtfully. 'You'll 'ave to use Bert's razor.'

''Course I will. What's wrong with that?'

'I dunno.' Her face suddenly lit up. 'He might 'ave something to say about it though, if he can see down here.'

Jack looked up, cocked his head to one side and raised his voice. 'You don't care if I use your razor, do you, Bert?'

'Turn it in, Jack.' Liz tried not to laugh.

'Shhh . . . he's trying to tell me something.' Jack pretended to be listening. 'You know I wouldn't do a thing like that!' he said to the ceiling. 'Anyway, I don't like Imperial Leather, you know that!'

'You're bloody mad, Jack,' said Liz, wiping a tear from her eye.

Jack leaned forward and put his face close to Liz's. 'Yeah. And don't you forget it.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means, Lizzie, anyone who talks to the ceiling, or a chair, or the air, might be on course for losing some of their marbles.'

'You'll find some mustard made up in a little white eggcup, Laura! It's on the shelf above the green cupboard!' Liz called out, changing the subject and keeping her flushed face away from Jack.

'The next time that bubbly widower invites you to a seance, tell him to pick up the blower and talk to me. I'll give him a message or two!'

'I only went the once, Jack. Gawd knows how you got to know about it.'

Jack tapped the side of his nose. 'The East End's not all that big a place.' He gave her a wink.

'If he wants to date you, there's nothing wrong with that. But tell him you'd rather go to the pictures.'

'Leave off, Jack. Dates at my age?'

'You can bet on it. There's a lot of lonely men out there, Liz. Just make sure you don't pick the wrong one.'

'Honestly, Jack! Bert's not been gone five minutes—'

'I'm not talking about a bit of the other. I'm talking about companionship.'

'Oh right,' she said, embarrassed, 'I'll remember that when a bloke struggles to undo my Cross-Your-Heart brassiere.'

Jack left the room, laughing to himself. 'All right if I put one of Bert's shirts on?'

'Yeah, go on then.' Liz knew exactly what Jack was up to. He was bringing the memory of her Bert out into the open, and it made her feel good.

Walking arm in arm with Laura along Cambridge Heath Road, Jack was suddenly aware that Kay had dropped behind. Turning his head to call her, he realized that the last thing his teenage daughter wanted was to be seen out with her mum and dad. 'You all right, Kay?' he called, more out of habit than concern.

'Yeah. I'm gonna cut through Barmy park.'

'You'll 'ave to be quick then. The park keeper'll be locking them gates soon!'

With the experience of a townie, Kay zigzagged expertly between the traffic and disappeared into the wide gateway next to Bethnal Green tube station.

'Jack . . . there's something I want to tell you,' Laura pulled her arm away from his and pushed both hands into the pockets of her jacket.

'Fire away.'

'I didn't go to Harlow today.' She held her breath, ready to deliver the next crashing blow.

'I know that.' He sounded very matter-of-fact.

Laura stopped dead in her tracks and threw her shoulders back with an air of indignation. 'You what?'

He slipped his arm around her waist and walked her along the pavement, smiling into her mystified eyes.

'You found Patsy's letter, right?'

'Liz!' Laura couldn't believe her sister-in-law would go behind her back.

'Oh, charming. Liz knows about it as well. Why not tell the whole bloody world!'

'Well, if it wasn't Liz?'

'Oh, Laura! One day it was in my jacket pocket, the next day it was gone, then it was back again.'

'I don't know what to say.' Laura allowed him to

walk her under the railway arch instead of turning left for home.

'Wait till we get to the Carpenter's. I'll buy you a rum and black and we can talk about it.' He squeezed her arm. 'That sound all right?'

'I don't know. Do what you want. Let's not change the habit of a lifetime.' They walked on in silence, each wondering what the outcome of the evening would be.

Pushing open the door of the pub, Jack showed a hand to a few dockers who were drinking at the bar. He quickly looked round for a quiet table and pointed at one in the corner. Laura settled herself down while he had a word with his friends and ordered a round.

'Bit out of order, wasn't it, Jack? You not turning up this afternoon?' The man was a large docker and not someone to fall out with.

'Sometimes, Jim, problems at home are more important than anything.' He looked him straight in the eye and hoped for the best. 'We've just come from Liz's as well. Poor mare. Wouldn't stop crying over Bert.'

The man squeezed Jack's shoulder. 'Give Jack a whisky, will you, Dave.' The barman stopped what he was doing and pushed a glass under the optic.

Downing the whisky in one go, Jack shuddered.

'That's better,' he said, and forced a sigh. 'I think I'm gonna 'ave to take a back seat for a while.'

'Understandable, mate, understandable. We'll pass the word. Just show your face now and then though, eh? The men 'ave got a lot of respect for you, Jack.'

Feeling lighter, Jack paid for his round and carried the drinks to the table in the corner and sat down.

'I take it you saw Patsy?' Jack drew a deep breath and pulled his tobacco tin out of his pocket.

'And the little boy.'

'I'm sorry, Laura. It was the last thing I wanted, you seeing that letter.' He sighed. 'You had to find out sometime, I s'pose.'

'It's my own fault. I knew when she was pregnant. I should have worked it out for myself. But I wish you'd told me you were writing to her, Jack.' She sipped her rum and blackcurrant. 'I feel as if we've been living a lie.'

'Don't be daft, 'course we haven't. And look how you reacted once you did know! You was on the next train up there.'

'She's more attractive than I thought she'd be.' Laura felt the jealousy rise again. 'I'm surprised you're not living with her instead of me.' She tried to keep the anger out of her voice.

'Well that proves something, surely?'

'Does it?'

'Yes, it does. It proves I love you and not her.' He drank some of his beer and wiped the froth away from his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Always have done.'

'He looks so much like you and Kay . . .'

'Yeah?' Jack sounded pleased. 'I've only been the once. Just after he was born. Since then I've sent 'er a letter each month with a bit of cash in it for the rent.'

'Don't you think we should have done a bit more than that?' Laura could hardly believe she was saying it. 'He is Kay's brother, after all.'

'She didn't want any more than that. Only the rent. I wanted to see him, but . . .'

Laura pulled a packet of cigarettes out of her handbag. 'That's not the impression I got. I think she'd like some money for clothing. Not that Jac looked hard done by. I saw a pile of his things on the sideboard. I expect her parents and her boyfriend help out.'

'So.' Jack had had enough of this. 'Where does that leave us? Am I gonna be sent to Coventry or what?' He looked at her sheepishly.

'No. But you might find yourself on a train to Leicester if you're not careful.'

'Gimme a break, Laura.' Jack avoided her eyes

for fear he might see something he didn't care to. 'D'you want another drink, or what?'

'You should have told me you were writing to her, Jack. It opened up a very sore wound when I found that letter.'

'OK. I was in the wrong! I should 'ave told yer. What d'you want me to do, beg forgiveness?'

'I'll think of something.' Part of her wanted to say it was all right, but in her heart she knew she would be lying. 'Let it lie for now.'

Chapter Four

Standing behind the counter of Maynard's tobacconist's, Kay felt very nervous as she watched Gladys turn the *Open* sign around and unlock the front door. She was beginning to regret taking on the work and wondered if she would be able to cope. Arithmetic had never been her strongest subject at school, and she dreaded the thought of giving someone the wrong change.

'You'll be all right, luv,' Gladys winked at her. 'They won't bite your head off. Just watch me at first, you'll soon get the hang of it.'

Forcing a smile, Kay tried to ignore her rumbling stomach. 'My hands are sweating.'

Smiling, Gladys brushed her grey curls back off her face and peered into a small square mirror. 'That's why I took you on. I prefer to have sensitive people around me instead of some of the flashy women we've had in here from time to time.' She

squeezed Kay's arm. 'Why don't you put the kettle on? Only three sugars for me. I'm slimming.'

'Everyone seems to be on a diet in our firm,' Kay said, spooning sugar into both their mugs. 'They all wanna look like Jean Shrimpton.'

'You mean they all want to look like you! Seventeen . . . I wish I was your age again. Best time of your life. Or should be.' She looked sideways at Kay. 'Pity you 'ave to spend so much of your life working. Should be out there having fun. Money's not everything, you know.'

'It is when you need it. I'm saving to go abroad.'

'Ah . . . that's different. Money for fun – I'm all for that.'

'And my dad's on strike, otherwise my mum would have been able to help pay for the holiday.'

'Your *mum* would?'

'Dad doesn't want me to go.'

Gladys raised a hand, 'Say no more.'

Snapping two fingers off her Kit-Kat, she narrowed her eyes. 'What you wanna remember is this: don't go getting yourself locked into a courtship before you've turned twenty.' She dipped the chocolate biscuit into her coffee. 'I've seen more girls 'aving to get married before they've got the key to the front door than I've had baked beans. And I was one of the silly cows as well! It's the

eyes. They get you with their eyes. My Tom did. One look from him and the bit between my legs was throbbing.'

Kay liked her new boss, they got on like a house on fire, but as soon as it was time to get down to business, Gladys's personality changed. She was very efficient, and made it clear that she took pride in the shop; how it looked, how good the takings were and how long she had been manageress. Eight years sounded like a lifetime to Kay, but it made her feel comfortable knowing that Gladys knew exactly how to handle the awkward customers.

'You're a bit on the naïve side, Kay,' she said as they locked up at closing time, 'but there's no better way to learn about the human race than when they're parting with their money. They'll catch you if they can. You're gonna 'ave to learn how to read people's faces.'

When Kay walked into the kitchen later that evening, Laura and Jack were sitting waiting to see how she had got on. 'I've kept your dinner on steam. I don't think it will have spoiled,' Laura fussed around her.

'I don't care if it is. I'm starving!' Kay dropped on to a kitchen chair and smiled into Jack's grinning face. 'It was good, Dad! I liked it. And the extra cash'll come in handy.'

'For what?'

'New clothes, that sort of thing.' She hated lying to her dad but it was necessary.

'We're not on poor street, you know.'

'I know that. It's just that, you know, I wanna be independent.'

'Just like your mother, eh?'

Placing the hot plate in front of Kay, Laura tossed her hair back, proud. 'Nothing wrong with that.'

'True. So long as I don't end up being a spare part around here.'

They couldn't help smiling at the way he always put on the hangdog expression when he wanted a bit of attention and sympathy. Leaving the kitchen, he called back over his shoulder, 'Wouldn't mind a cup of tea by the telly!'

'Thanks for not telling Dad about my going to Spain, Mum.' Kay pushed a forkful of meat pudding into her mouth.

Laura looked at Kay, her eyes wide. 'God help me when you've gone and I do have to tell him. He'll hit the roof.'

There was a ring on the doorbell. 'That'll be Pamela,' Kay smiled, 'I knew she'd 'ave to come round to see how I got on. Anyone'd think this was my first job. Open the door for 'er, Mum.'

'What did your last slave die of?'

Kay laid down her cutlery. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to—'

'I'm only kidding. Don't be so sensitive!'

'Hallo!' Pamela's singsong voice reverberated along the passage and into the kitchen. 'Where is she?'

Looking up at her friend's sparkling face, Kay knew by her expression that she had something she couldn't wait to tell her.

'That looks nice.' She studied Kay's dinner.

'There's some left,' Laura said, following Pamela in. 'Have you eaten?'

'No, I'm on a diet.'

'You *are* joking?' Laura eyed the skinny form in front of her.

'I'm not. The girls at work say I've got enormous thighs. How can I wear a bikini with enormous thighs?'

'Keep your voice down!' Kay snapped. 'Dad's in the front room.'

'Sorry,' she mouthed. Turning to Laura, Pamela pulled her short skirt up above her knickers. 'See,' she said, looking as if she were about to cry. 'Look how thick they are.'

'But look how skinny the rest of your body is, love! You won't necessarily change your legs by

not eating. That's your natural shape. Family genes coming through.'

'You mean I'm always gonna have tree-trunks for legs?'

'That's right,' Kay said, 'just keep 'em covered up while you're out with me.'

Laura watched, bemused, as Pamela dropped on to a chair and wept.

'Take no notice, she's always doing that. It's not real crying. She only does it to get attention.'

'I do not!' Pamela sat up straight and the waterfall ceased instantly. 'I'll have some of that meat, Mrs Armstrong, but no pudding, thank you. I never eat stodge.'

'Help yourself.' Laura left them to it and joined Jack in the front room.

'You insult people all the time, Pamela.'

'Now what 'ave I said?'

Kay nodded towards the steak and kidney pudding in the steamer. '*I never eat stodge*,' she mimicked.

Pamela looked puzzled. 'What's insulting about that?'

'Just help yourself to what you want and shut up,' Kay grumbled, 'it's been a long day.'

Peering into the saucepan, Pamela turned up her nose. 'I don't think I'll bother. Can I make myself some toast instead?'

'Did you bring the holiday brochure?' Kay spoke quietly, coming straight to the point.

'Er . . . no.' There was a touch of worry in her voice.

'Why not?'

'Because there isn't one. Not for where we're going. Well there is, there's lots actually, but not for us.'

Kay narrowed her eyes and drew breath. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well . . . the man who's arranging all this knows the hotel owner in the resort where we're going, on the Costa Brava and—'

'Which resort? You said you'd find out which one today!'

'I forgot. Anyway,' she grinned broadly, 'I've paid our deposits so we're definitely booked in. And we won't have to share a room with anyone else but each other. I saw a photograph of the hotel. It's very nice.'

'Where do we fly from?' Kay was losing her patience.

'We don't.' Pamela popped two slices of bread under the grill. 'How d'yer turn this thing on?'

'You're not telling me we go by boat and coach?'

'Oh no! Train, boat, then an overnight sleeper train, then a coach, then another train and then a

Spanish bus. That way we'll get to see more of France and Spain. And it keeps the price down.'

'You mean it's not gonna cost forty pounds, then?'

'Oh yeah. But the man who's arranging it said that was very cheap.'

'Only by three pounds! I checked in the other brochures. And that's flying!'

'Is it?'

Sighing, Kay pushed her plate away. 'I take it you *have* found out the date we go?'

'Yeah. In two weeks' time.'

'You said it would be four or five weeks, at least!'

Pamela looked thoughtful. 'Did I?'

Closing her eyes, Kay imagined herself strangling her best friend. 'It's all right for you,' she grumbled, 'you've already saved up for it.'

'No I haven't. I'm skint.'

Eyeing her carefully, Kay waited for a grin to appear on Pamela's face. She hoped it was a joke.

'I'm gonna have to borrow it.'

Pushing one hand through her hair, exasperated, Kay began to regret they had ever made plans to go away together.

'Who from?' she asked, not thinking for one second that she would get a sensible answer.

'My mum and dad of course.'

'How do you know they'll lend it to you?'

'Because they said they would.' Pamela eased the lid off the biscuit tin and helped herself to a chocolate finger. 'They'll lend you some as well if you want. They're loaded.'

'No.' Kay clenched her teeth. 'I'll manage,' she said, suddenly feeling low. There she was, working all hours to get the cash together, and Pamela could get it from her parents simply by asking. It didn't seem fair.

Kay scraped the remains of her dinner into the waste bin and washed her plate. 'I think I'll have a bath and an early night.'

'Right-ho. I only came to tell you that I've booked.' She helped herself to another biscuit. 'You could say thank you,' Pamela said, a hurt look on her face.

'Yeah. Thanks a bundle. You're a really good organizer.'

'At least I'm good at something, then,' she said, pleased with herself, taking Kay's sarcasm for real. 'I'll see if I can get the man who's arranging all this to let me borrow the photograph for you. The other girls think it's great.'

'Is it an all-girl party then?' Disillusionment was setting in with every passing second.

'Oh no. Four blokes, I think. And if they're all like the two I saw today,' she grimaced, 'they're about as exciting as boiled sausages.'

On the Friday morning before departure day, Laura smiled into Kay's worried face. 'You don't look very excited.'

'Scared more like. At what Dad'll say.'

'He won't find out.' Laura smiled. 'We've done a good job on him. He really believes you're off to the Isle of Sheppey to stay in aunt Liz's caravan. What the eye doesn't see.' Laura winked at Kay. 'We'll tell him once you're back. Won't have any choice then, will he? You'll be as brown as a berry.'

'Hope so.' Kay looked at the kitchen clock and quickly swallowed the remains of her tea. 'Thanks for the fiver. I'll bring you back a souvenir.'

'Don't be silly. You spend it on yourself. That's why I gave it to you. And if you run out—'

'I know, I know. Borrow it off of Moneybags.' She made for the door. 'Stop worrying, I'll have plenty. See you tonight.'

Arriving five minutes early at the bus stop, Kay let her mind wander, thinking of the next day. She tried to imagine herself lying on a long stretch of golden sand and swimming in a clear turquoise sea. She made a mental list of the few incidentals she would

have to buy during her lunch-break. Her aunt Liz had been round the day before and slipped five pounds in an envelope between her eiderdown and pillow. *A little treat* was scribbled on it in green biro.

When the bus arrived, Kay climbed aboard and looked for her West Indian friend.

'Over here, darlin'!' Juanita called out, her beautiful smile sending a surge of excitement through Kay. Sitting down next to her, Kay squeezed the woman's arm. 'I can't believe it's come round at last.'

'Have you told your father yet?'

'No.'

Juanita sucked her teeth and slowly shook her head. 'You're one hell of a brave girl, or somethin'.'

'What do you want me to bring you back?' Kay said, wanting to change the subject.

Juanita thought about it. 'A nice big Spanish señor!' She roared with laughter and her warm, sweet-smelling body shook.

Taking her arm, Kay moved closer and rested her head on Juanita's solid shoulder. 'I'm really looking forward to it, Juanita,' she sighed.

'I know, I know.' Juanita turned away and stared out of the window. 'Just be careful, eh? I want to see you back on this bus as happy as you are now.'

'I will be. The only difference'll be that I'll be blacker than you are.'

'You think so?' she tried not to laugh. 'With that skin?'

'Two weeks of non-stop sunshine.'

'And you'll look like a lobster.'

'I'm not stupid, you know. I have bought some protection cream. I'll wear that for the first few days, then I'll put oil on.'

Juanita looked at Kay with half-closed eyes. 'Oil?'

'Why not?'

'Listen. You don't put oil on, y'hear?' She raised her voice as if she were scolding a child. 'You put oil on that paper-thin white skin and you'll be covered in blisters!'

'All right, all right!' Kay felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment as other people on the bus looked at the two of them shouting at each other. 'No oil – OK?' Kay pulled away and folded her arms defiantly. 'Not until the end of the second week.'

'I don't know! As if I haven't got enough with three grown-up children to worry about, I have to get lumbered wit' you.'

'Perhaps I can meet these grown-up sons of yours when I get back, when I'm brown, when I won't stand out like a sore thumb.'

'Maybe. We'll see. You could do with some spice in your bones, that's for sure.'

For the rest of the short journey into the city, both Kay and Juanita were wrapped in their own thoughts as the bus crawled along through the rush-hour traffic.

'Show me the palm of your hand,' Juanita broke in.

Kay did as she was asked, making sure the bus conductor had seen that she wanted to get off at the next stop. With her eyes on him and her palm spread, Kay waited for Juanita to tell her fortune, assuming that was her intention. Instead of words of wisdom, Kay felt two coins being pressed into her palm, the size of half-crowns.

'I can't take that.'

'Why not? My money not good enough?' Juanita's big brown eyes widened.

Kay bent down and kissed her on the cheek. 'Thanks. I'll send you a postcard!' she said, as she ran along the aisle towards the exit.

'You don't have my address!'

'I'll send it to the bus!' Kay yelled and then jumped down on to the kerb. Waving through the window, she felt a lump in her own throat as she saw tears rolling down Juanita's brown cheeks. 'I'll be all right!' Kay called out, as the bus pulled away.

Using every bit of concentration she made a mental note of the bus's number-plate, and as she

crossed the road and walked along St John's Street, she repeated it over and over again.

'Six minutes early again?' Alf dragged the gates shut and pressed the button to ascend. 'You're getting a bit keen, ain't yer?' he accused.

Kay wouldn't answer him; she was still repeating the bus number-plate and didn't want to lose it.

'And no nipping into that boardroom! I've seen yer! Sneaking in like a cat burglar!' he called after her.

'Don't waste your breath on her, Alf,' the stocky canteen manageress called out. 'Lazy little cow's not worth it. None of 'em are. You should see them in the Ladies' at tea-break. Only supposed to take ten minutes. Ha! Fifteen, more like. Fill the place up with smoke and giggling and all.'

Alf crashed the gates closed. 'They should go in the army, the lot of 'em; boys and girls alike.'

Grabbing her notepad from her desktop, Kay jotted down the number-plate. When the door suddenly flew open and Mr Grieves marched in whistling a little tune Kay stiffened, knowing he would be embarrassed when he realized he had an audience, and a junior at that. She had never heard him whistling before.

'Morning Mr Grieves!' she said boldly, letting

him know she was there before he did anything else out of character.

'Eh? Oh, it's you, Kay. Yes, well, it's good to see you in early for a change.' He peered suspiciously at her. 'You're looking a bit flushed.' He instinctively looked around the office as if someone else might be there. Someone who shouldn't be.

'I arrive at the stop in good time every morning to catch my bus,' Kay was beginning to get annoyed, 'and I always catch it. If the traffic's bad, I'm a couple of minutes late; if it's good, I'm early.'

'Fetch me the P.R. Marshall file, would you please, Kay. We may as well make an early start.'

'I haven't taken my coat off yet.'

Mr Grieves looked at her over the top of his bifocals. 'So I see.'

Pulling her coat off, Kay threw it on to her typist's chair, dragged the file he wanted from a small grey cabinet and put it down on his desk.

'I'll take my coat to the cloakroom now, if that's all right.'

Mr Grieves said nothing. He gave her a look instead, which spoke for itself. She had better watch her manners.

Slipping her coat on to a hanger in the ladies' powder room, Kay turned to the other girls who

were busy studying their faces in the large wall mirrors, and applying make-up.

'What you looking so chuffed about?' said June from the switchboard, slipping a gold-cased lipstick into a white make-up bag.

'If you don't know now, you never will.' Kay grinned back at June's reflection.

'Oh, of course! It's tomorrow you're going away.'

'All right for some,' one of the girls from the typing pool said coldly. 'Must be nice to be an only child. Having your parents pay for you to go abroad.'

'That's where you're wrong!' Kay rejoined. 'It's coming out of my own purse, actually!'

'Yeah?' The girl flicked more mascara on to her upper lashes. 'Your purse must be like the magic porridge-pot then, the salary this tight-fisted firm pays.'

June threw Kay a look, warning her not to say too much. Kay was quick to pick up on it. 'I've been saving up for a year,' she said quietly. Wanting to end it before she was asked any more questions, Kay left the cloakroom without combing her hair.

'We've got a lot to get through today, Kay.' Mr Grieves spoke to her through the frosted glass partition that separated Kay's desk from his.

'You'll need to tie things up so that Doreen knows where everything is while you're away.'

Kay looked across at Doreen and they simultaneously rolled their eyes. Doreen was Kay's senior and had taught her everything she knew, efficiency being top of the list. Between them they had everything tied up, and each knew that Doreen could handle the responsibility for two weeks without too much difficulty.

'I want you to finish my letters before you start sorting the pay packets.' Mr Grieves sounded as if he begrudged her going away. In truth, he was probably feeling a bit peeved because he had never been abroad himself, and was Kay's senior by twenty years. He was in a rut.

'I'll start typing the registered envelopes as soon as you're ready.' She spoke quietly and with respect. Despite his sometimes austere manner, she knew he was an old softie at heart. It was the same every Friday fortnight on pay-day. The busiest day for the chief accounts clerk.

'I can always stop when you're ready to dictate,' she added, trying to ease the feeling of tension in the office.

'Good girl.' He went back to his figure work.

Pulling her typewriter forward, Kay caught Doreen's eye again and a smile passed between them. Doreen

often teased Kay that when she turned on the charm, Mr Grieves was like putty in her hands.

'Now then . . .' Kay started to talk to herself, a habit which could be irritating to others. Mr Grieves, James the junior and Doreen often complained about her mumbling.

'Where did I put the registered envelope list?' She pulled at each of the four drawers in her desk, and still couldn't find it. She tried them all again. No luck.

'Kay!' Grieves sighed loudly. 'If you open another drawer . . .' His voice was tinged with threat. 'I'm trying to concentrate!'

Kay apologized, and made an effort to make less noise. Searching through some papers in a wire tray on her desk, she finally found the list she needed.

'Seems I'm not the only one who chose this month to go away.' She was talking to herself again. 'One, two, three, four, five,' she quickly counted aloud, 'six, seven—'

'Shhh!' Grieves made his feelings known for the second time. Reprimanding herself, Kay settled down to work and tried not to be distracted. She was excited, and as much as she tried to act as if it were a normal busy pay-day, she couldn't stop the surge of excitement that swept over her from time to time.

Doing her utmost to concentrate on her work

and not think about the packed suitcase in her bedroom, Kay began to type addresses on the registered envelopes which were to be posted to members of staff who were away that week, either on holiday or off sick.

There were over six hundred people on the staff and it was Kay's responsibility to separate and put into bundles the departmental salaries, ready for collection.

Later that day, just as she was about to slip a pay packet into a registered envelope, the bell went for tea-break. Pushing her typewriter back, Kay had no idea that an empty registered envelope addressed to Mr Woods had also been forced to the back of her desk and had fallen behind it, hidden from view.

By late afternoon, several staff from various departments had been in to collect the salaries, and the filled registered envelopes had already gone to the post room.

'Afternoon.' The soft voice of Stephen Drake drifted into Kay's thoughts as she sat staring at nothing.

'Oh, sorry,' Kay said, 'I was miles away.' She looked up into the drawn face of the eighteen-year-old and grinned. 'Hope you haven't been standing there too long?'

'No, I've just arrived.'

Kay took the bundle of salaries from the tray, put them to one side and began to write in the receipt book. *Salaries – 8 M*, before realizing her mistake. 'You're not from the Mail Sales department, are you?'

'No. Bought Ledger,' said Drake quietly.

'I'm going mad.' She smiled, crossed out the M and wrote *Bought Ledger* instead.

The young man signed, flicked through the salaries, counting them under his breath, then turned to leave. As he reached the door he asked Kay what he should do about the head of department's salary, Mr Woods, who was away on holiday.

'Oh, his will be sent on by registered post,' she smiled, thinking that Woods wasn't the only one to be escaping Thompson's for a while.

'You're sure about that?' Drake asked.

'Oh yeah,' Kay wondered why he was blushing. She showed him the list on her desk and pointed out Mr Woods's name.

'Ah, right. Thanks.' A little awkward, the young man left the office. Something didn't feel right, but Kay couldn't decide what it was.

Once outside, Stephen Drake leaned by the door, looked through the salaries again, pulled out the one marked for Mr Woods and slipped it into his inside pocket.

As he walked along the corridor a broad grin swept across his red face. The stupid little tart had made a mistake and made his day. It was a fat pay packet, and Mr Woods being the head of department probably earned more in a week than he did in a month. And since he was on holiday leave, it meant that instead of a fortnight's salary in that packet, there would be four weeks' worth of cash.

It was true he had signed for eight salaries and would only be handing in seven, but the dizzy blonde had messed up the receipt book in any case, making another mistake over the name of his department. He was home and dry, and didn't give a toss as to how she would explain the missing salary. After all she was common as muck, from the worst part of London – probably came from a family of thieves. Whereas he, Stephen Drake, was the son of a Detective Superintendent at the Met.

Feeling pleased with himself, he pushed his finger on the lift bell for a few seconds longer than necessary.

'You're young enough to walk down!' Alf was far from pleased at being called up to the third floor by a junior.

'Sorry, I wasn't thinking.' Drake had taken on his innocent, shy look again, but there was no fooling Alf. He had seen dozens of people come and go at

Thompson's and prided himself on his perception of character.

Slamming the gates shut, Alf stared into Drake's face. 'Someone filed a complaint against me five weeks ago, he said I was a bit on the slow side. Said he had to wait five minutes for the lift.'

Drake shook his head. 'Some people have no respect for their elders. Whoever it was should have had a good dressing-down.'

Throwing the gates back on the ground floor, Alf felt a pang of concern. This young man was very smart, both in dress and thinking. The type to go far. The sort who could easily rise to a managerial position.

'I can assure you it wasn't me.' Drake looked straight into Alf's face, daring him to answer back.

'No. I just thought I would mention it, in case you knew.'

'If I hear anything.' Drake gave the worried lift man a friendly punch on the upper arm and walked with his head high out of the building to the annexe, where he worked as a junior office clerk.

Alf inhaled slowly, pursed his lips and wondered why that young man made him feel uncomfortable.

He wasn't the only one. There was no way Kay could have known that Drake was going to be the cause of a nightmare she would have to face after her holiday, but somehow she felt uneasy about him and couldn't think why. Looking up at the clock on the wall above Doreen's desk, she was relieved to see it was ten minutes past five.

After a hectic day, the office now had a calm air about it. 'You, er, you can knock off now, Kay.' Mr Grieves looked over the glass partition. 'I expect you've some packing to do?'

'I've been packed for a week,' she grinned.

'And don't get oil on my bikini!' Doreen placed the cover on her adding machine. 'Or my sun-dress!'

'Oil? You'll burn to a cinder.' Grieves pulled on his trilby. 'Now then.' He moved closer to Doreen and whispered something in her ear, causing her to turn around and smile at Kay. They both stood there, smiling at her.

'This is for you, love.' Doreen held out a white envelope. 'It's from me, the girls on the switchboard, and Mr Grieves.'

Moving slowly forward, Kay felt tears welling up in her eyes. They were giving her a card, wishing her *bon voyage*. Tearing it open, she kept her eyes down,

determined not to cry like a baby but to accept the gesture like an adult.

As she drew the card out and opened it her eyes nearly popped out of her head. Three crisp new ten-shilling notes were inside. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she pressed her lips together and nodded.

'It couldn't have been easy, love. What with your dad on strike.'

'Everyone's being so kind . . .'

'Compassion is only shown to those who deserve it, Kay.' Mr Grieves tipped his trilby and wished her a safe journey and Doreen a good weekend, and as the door swung shut behind him, Kay felt a certain sympathy for him.

'He's not a such bad bloke, is he?' she said.

'Not when you get to know him.' Doreen tied her silk Paisley scarf under her chin.

Standing by the door, Kay looked back at her tidy desk and felt a nagging worry, as if she had forgotten to do something important.

Turning the lights off, Doreen placed a hand on Kay's shoulder. 'It'll be there when you come back,' she smiled.

Tired at the end of a busy day, they left the silent office, the empty registered envelope addressed to Mr Woods still wedged between the back of Kay's desk and the partition.

On her return from Spain, she would have to face the consequences of that small accident, which would thrust her into the adult world more quickly than she could anticipate.

Chapter Five

Standing in the tiny sleeping compartment of the French train, heading for the Spanish border, Kay stared bleakly at the small top bunk. 'I can't sleep up there, Pamela, I just can't. I'll be sick again, I know I will.'

'No you won't. You've had your travel pills.' Pamela was beginning to lose her patience.

'They didn't work on the boat, did they!'

'Only because you didn't take them early enough. Now climb up there and try the bed out.'

'Call that a bed? If I'd 'ave known we'd be travelling for this long, I would never have come.'

'Stop moaning.'

'What if I need to be sick again?' She turned to one of the other women who was sharing the sleeping compartment with them. They had been doing their best to ignore her.

'Please let me sleep below.'

'I'm very sorry, but no!' One of the women cut in. 'I said all along that I wanted to be below. And we were here first!' She looked fiercely back at Kay. 'And please take something up there with you to be sick in. Should the occasion arise.'

'And if you are sick,' the woman's companion added, 'make sure you take the vessel away and wash it.'

'If you stop thinking about it, it probably won't happen,' her friend chimed in.

Kay gazed at the women and wished she had the energy to tell them what she thought, but she felt like death. And the prospect of sleeping on the train didn't help, with hours to go and still suffering from the after-effects of the rough crossing from Dover. She looked up at the bunk again and thought about her bedroom at home, where all would be so very still and quiet. Then she thought about her mum and dad, and two weeks suddenly seemed like a lifetime.

'Now, if you don't mind, my friend and I would like to eat our sandwiches without a running commentary on your stomach!' The women sat on the edge of their bunks and peeled greaseproof paper from their sandwiches. The smell of hard-boiled eggs filled the compartment.

After another visit to the lavatory, Kay opened a window and sucked in fresh air which tasted

wonderful. Feeling slightly better, she turned to Pamela. 'I'll be all right soon. Those bloody bitches don't help much.'

Pamela poured some lemonade into a paper cup. 'Here, get this down you.'

'When this train stops, I'm getting off.' Kay drank the lemonade down in one go.

'We'll all be getting off.'

'And I'm turning round and going back.' She let out a long, loud belch, and didn't care who heard her.

'Good. Can I borrow some of your clothes then?' Pamela knew how to handle Kay. They had, after all, been friends since nursery school.

'What 'appens after this train, anyway?'

'A nice long coach trip over the Pyrenees mountains which rise to . . .' Pamela closed her eyes, remembering what she had been told that day, 'over eleven thousand feet. That's high.'

'I hope you enjoy the view.'

''Course I will. We both will. No choice really. The roads are very narrow and winding.'

'At least you read up on it. I suppose that's something.'

'No I never. This woman at work told me all about it. She went last year. Never again, though.'

Kay stared into Pamela's face. 'Why not?'

'I don't know. I didn't ask. She just said never again.'

The biggest mistake of their arduous journey to Spain was that Kay allowed Pamela to talk her into sitting on the back seat of the coach. She said she would be better off away from the engine. Kay could see the sense in that, until she learned where the engine actually was. Then it was too late to change seats.

The Spanish coach driver was obviously used to the route across the mountains. It seemed as though he knew every hairpin bend. When the rear end of the coach tipped over the edge of a road, the madman would roar with laughter at the screams coming from Kay and Pamela. The higher the coach climbed, the faster the driver seemed to go. Kay wanted to be like the others and enjoy the view, but she couldn't bring herself to take her hands away from her eyes.

'You know what's worse than this?' Pamela murmured. 'We've got to go through it all again on the way back.'

When the nightmare ride finally came to an end and the mountains were behind them, Kay and Pamela fell asleep on each other's shoulders and didn't wake until the coach pulled up outside Hotel Ruiz, in the tiny resort of Costa Lana, four hours later.

Half asleep and exhausted, the girls struggled with their suitcases, following a porter who led them and a few others out of the small hotel and up a side-street. Neither of them could be bothered to ask where they were going. All they wanted were their beds. It was ten o'clock at night.

They were guided through the living room of a Spanish family, up a narrow staircase and into a small but clean twin-bedded room. Once the young Spanish porter left them, Kay dropped on to her bed and stayed there. She was almost asleep when she felt Pamela pulling at her arm.

'Kay, I'm starving. Let's go and get something to eat.'

Forcing her eyelids open Kay slowly shook her head. 'I'm too tired.'

'No you're not. It's all in the mind. Come on, we're in Spain now. It's early. People don't go out until now.' She poured the remains of the lemonade into a glass she found in the bathroom.

'Drink this and you'll feel better.'

Kay did as she was told but didn't feel better. The lemonade was warm. 'Can I go back to sleep now?'

'No. We're going out to explore the nightclubs.'

'You go. You're bound to see some of the people we travelled with. Talk to them.'

Leaning back on fat pillows, Pamela sipped her

lemonade. 'Did you clock that dishy bloke in Reception? He was gorgeous.'

'Go and talk to him, then.'

'He touched my hand deliberately when he handed me our key.'

Pulling herself up into a sitting position, Kay stared at her feet. 'I need a bath,' she yawned.

'No. A shower.'

'A nice long soak—' Kay stopped in her tracks. 'Why did you say no?'

'It's a lovely shower.'

'There isn't a bath, is there?'

'Spanish people must take showers,' she shrugged. 'I s'pose it's because there's a water shortage out here,' Pamela commented thoughtfully. 'Daft really, 'cos there's a lot of sea. What you wearing then?'

Kay peered at her through half-open eyes. 'What?'

'Tonight. When we go out to the nightclub. What you wearing?'

'You mean it. You really expect me to go dancing after all that travelling?'

'After your shower.' She grinned again. 'I'll unpack while you're in there. I'll hang everything up properly, in the ward—' she gazed around the room until her eyes settled on a painted cupboard. 'In the cupboard. You can have the best hangers.'

Kay felt a pang of guilt. Poor Pamela was trying

so hard, and all she had done was complain. 'Share the hangers out fair and square. But you don't have to unpack for me.'

'I want to.'

'You want to see what I've brought with me, you mean?'

''Course. I might wanna borrow something.'

Kay let herself be persuaded into the shower, and with warm water cascading down, she gently rubbed the spicy Spanish soap over her body until she was covered in suds. The water was much softer than at home, and she began to feel better than she had in a long time.

'Can I borrow your mini-dress? The black Mary Quant-style dress with the white thingumabobs down the front and back!' Pamela yelled from the other side of the door.

'Yeah, but not until I've worn it first. You can 'ave it tomorrow night.'

'But he'll 'ave seen you in it!'

'Exactly!' Kay laughed to herself. This felt more like it. This felt like being on holiday. She was beginning to relish the thought of nightclubs and fun.

'I heard someone say it's been really sunny!' Pamela couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice. 'We'll dance until the sun comes up and then sleep all day on the beach.'

Wrapping herself in a big white towel, Kay stepped out of the bathroom. 'I can't get over how warm the air is.'

'I can't get over those Spanish eyes,' Pamela said dreamily.

Dropping down on her bed, Kay drew her knees up and stretched her arms. 'I feel brilliant!'

'Thank God for that. I thought you was gonna die on that boat.'

'Don't! No more, Pamela. And I mean it. I want to forget that trip. OK?' She glared at her friend.

'I don't know whether to 'ave a shower or not.' Pamela turned away. 'And if you ever talk to me like that in front of anyone else,' she pulled a dress out of the cupboard, put it up to her and admired her reflection in the wall mirror, 'I'll talk about small cubes of pork fat on a piece of string.'

'Enough!' Kay screamed. 'It's not funny!'

'I know it's not bloody funny! The way you *talk* to me!' Pamela's face was white, her dark blue eyes alive with anger. 'You're always so bossy!' She turned her back on Kay and lowered her voice. 'Or putting me down, and sometimes in front of other people.'

Kay inhaled slowly and thought about it for a minute. 'It never occurred to me I was doing that.'

'Oh, it's not *you*! I don't even know why I said it.'

Seeing that Pamela was keeping her face turned away, Kay slowly circled her. 'Pamela? You OK? You're not crying are yer?'

'No, I'm not,' she sniffed, trying to control her face.

'Hey,' Kay put her arms around her best friend's shoulders. 'I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was being a cow.'

'It's not you.' Another pained expression suddenly spread across her face.

Guiding Pamela towards her bed, Kay sat down next to her and stroked her back. 'What is it, Pamela? You can tell me, surely?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Of course it does.' Kay tried not to be upset. One of them had to be strong. They were, after all, in a strange country.

'It's my mum,' Pamela covered her face with her hands.

Kay was beginning to fear the worst. 'She's not ill, is she?'

'No.' There was a pause. 'I miss her.'

'You miss her?'

'And my dad.'

'You miss your dad as well?' Kay bit the inside of her cheek and didn't even smile.

'And my cat!' Pamela threw herself on to the

bed, buried her face in a pillow and howled. 'My cat'll be looking for me, I know he will! He'll be sitting outside my bedroom and he'll be crying and my mum'll start and so will my dad. They'll all be crying, and it's Sunday night!'

Kay wanted to ask what was significant about Sunday night but she didn't dare speak. She stuffed the corner of her pillow in her mouth and kept her back to Pamela as she lay on her own bed. Her body shook, and all she could hope was that should Pamela come out from under the pillow, she would think that Kay was crying, not laughing.

'My grandma and grandpa always pop in of a Sunday night,' Pamela sobbed, 'they'll be in a state as well. And that's bound to start Joey off!'

That was it. That was more than Kay could stand. She shrieked with laughter and couldn't stop. It was Joey that did it. Joey, the half-dead blackbird that the family were nursing back to life. The bird had been with them for four months. They had even bought it a cage, swing, small mirror and every other comfort available for the feathered pet.

Sitting bolt upright, Pamela stared disbelievingly at Kay. 'You're laughing!'

'And so would you be, if I was going on about a half-dead bird missing me!' Kay buried her head in

her pillow again. The next thing she knew, Pamela was thumping her with something soft, and she was happy to retaliate. The pair of them were enjoying a really good pillow fight.

Thirty minutes later they stood by the door of their room, admiring each other. Kay had given in over the Mary Quant-style dress and thought it looked better on Pamela in any case.

'Maybe I should have worn my denims . . .' Pamela stood awkwardly, checking her reflection in the mirror. 'I'm overdressed next to you.'

'I'll 'ave my frock back, in that case.'

'You think I look all right then?' Pamela was begging for a compliment.

'You look great. And the only reason I'm in jeans is because I . . . feel in that kind of a mood,' she shrugged. 'Come on! We've washed our hair, polished our shoes – now let's she what this place has to offer.'

Ten minutes later, they were handing in their key to Reception in order to let Pepe, the handsome receptionist, know that they were going out on the town.

'The Cellar!' he called after them as they waltzed out of the hotel. 'It's very best!'

'You have beautiful eyes!' Pepe shouted into Pamela's

ear as he held her close. 'They are like sky before night. Beautiful hair. It is like—'

'I love this song!' Pamela yelled back. She had to shout to make herself heard above the noise in the Cellar. Forgetting that she had always been singled out as a growler at school, she began to sing along to 'Rambling Rose' as she eased herself out of the tight grip that Pepe had on her.

'Why?' Pepe asked, gazing into her face, trying to win her over with his big brown cow-eyes.

'Why what?' she asked, irritated that he was interrupting the song.

'Why you no come close?' He tried his best to sound offended.

Even though Pamela had had quite a few Martinis she still had her wits about her. 'You're too hot, Pepe!' she laughed.

'Pamela!' Kay shouted, trying to be heard above the din. 'I'm going back to the hotel!'

'Why? This is great!'

'I'll see you later.' Weaving her way through the mass of bodies, Kay made for the exit, keeping her eyes down so she didn't have to acknowledge the smiles of local boys reaching out to stroke her long blonde hair.

Once outside Kay was grateful for the fresh air, which although warm was a lot cooler than the tiny

nightclub. Making her way back to the hotel she wondered how Pamela could be so full of energy after two days of travelling. She was ready for her bed. The bright white spotlights of the Cellar and the smoky atmosphere had made her eyes smart, and there was a dull ache spreading across her forehead.

Ignoring complimentary remarks from a group of Spanish boys, she walked quickly along the narrow pavement and turned left, believing that was the way back to the hotel. She couldn't stop the niggling feeling inside reminding her about Pamela's well-being. After all, it was only the first night. Remembering that her friend's dancing-partner worked at the hotel she felt easier, telling herself that Pamela was probably in less danger with a local than with one of the gorgeous French students they'd met at the Cellar. It was the delicious aroma of freshly baked bread that caused Kay to stop and take in her surroundings. At first she was interested to know where the smell was coming from, but when she realized that she had no idea where she was, a surge of panic shot through her. Had she taken the wrong turning? Or was it left out of the club and then the third on the right?

The narrow cobbled street was practically in darkness, only a glow coming from the windows of one

or two of the old terraced houses. Looking further along the street she could see that the bakery was lit up and the door was open. She quickly made her way towards it, praying that someone inside could speak English. Maybe he or she could direct her to her hotel.

Fear gripped Kay and she suddenly stopped in her tracks. She had forgotten the name of the hotel. Looking backwards, she wondered if she should retrace her steps to the nightclub. Knowing she would have to pass the local boys who were hanging around, she decided to go forward. Bracing herself and trying desperately to remember something about the hotel as a reference, she made for the bakery.

Standing in the doorway, Kay found herself face to face with a man, whom she imagined to be the baker's assistant, kneading dough on a large wooden table. She stood for a few seconds staring at him, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks. Was that Zacchi, her first love whom she'd met in Kent, on the hop fields?

'We're not open, but you are welcome to try some hot bread,' the young man smiled. 'Or a cake?' He pinched three strands of dough together at one end and began to plait with expertise.

It must have been the Martinis, thought Kay. Of

course it isn't Zacchi. He's taller, his eyes are a lighter brown, but his black hair and eyebrows and long lashes, they're nearly the same . . .

'You look as if you've lost your way.' He was laughing at her, and Kay could feel herself go weak at the knees. He had the most wonderful smile she had ever seen, and his golden skin showed off his pearly-white teeth.

'I have,' she said, unable to keep anxiety out of her voice. 'And I can't remember the name of my hotel.'

Smiling, he pulled some dough from a larger piece and threw it on to the floured surface. 'Can you remember your own name? Or do you wear a label around your neck?' He was flirting with her and she loved it.

'You've got flour on your hair and nose. And it's Kay.'

'You've got a very pretty face, and it's Chris.' He blew a loose strand of hair from his face and suddenly looked shy. 'I'm supposed to wear that hat.' He nodded to a sparkling white baseball cap.

'Well wear it, then!' Kay reached out and grabbed it, then placed it firmly on his head. 'Shall I tuck the loose curls in?'

He took a slow, deep breath. 'You want me to explode?' He shook his head. 'Those lovely slim

hands touching a man's neck would send sparks flying up and down his spine.'

'I'm sure.' Kay backed away from him, wondering if her mascara had run as her eyes had watered from the smoke at the nightclub.

'You arrived today, I take it?' He looked at her sideways.

Was he psychic too? 'How can you tell?'

'Lily-white skin,' he grinned, looking from her face to her hair and making it obvious he was impressed. 'It's very blonde. Do you bleach it?'

'No I don't!' How dare he suggest she used peroxide? 'I occasionally put lemon juice on it, but that's all.'

Carefully placing a second plaited loaf on a proving-tray, he nodded towards a wooden stool. 'If you want to sit down and wait for ten minutes, I'll help you find your hotel.'

Watching him work on another piece of dough, Kay studied his face to see what it was that made him so attractive.

Chris's eyes were almond-shaped; his nose straight; his jaw square, and his smooth skin had a deep golden tan. He had high cheek-bones and thick, dark eyebrows. He was very handsome and try as she might, Kay could not find any fault with his looks. And he had charisma.

He's probably the most conceited man on this earth, Kay told herself, turning her attention to the next best thing – hot crusty bread on the cooling-rack.

'If you look in that blue and white dish, you'll find some butter. Knife in the top drawer,' he nodded towards a small scrubbed pine table in the corner of the bakery. 'If you think we need plates, they're in the cupboard underneath.'

Was he a mind reader too? 'How come you speak such good English?' Kay said with a touch of suspicion in her voice. She couldn't help herself. This bloke was too good to be true.

'I lived in England from the ripe old age of two,' he said.

Kay smiled inwardly. That's what it was about him. 'You do look like a Londoner, as it 'appens.'

'Disappointed?'

'Why should I be?' She was noncommittal.

'I could be the first Spanish bloke you've spoken to, and I turn out to be regular old townie from back home.'

Pushing the last loaf of bread into shape, he slapped it down with the others and lifted the large metal tray with one hand, raising it level with his broad shoulders. 'Don't go away, I won't be a [redacted].'

Hearing him speak fluent Spanish to someone in the back room, she felt herself melt inside. Watch yourself, Kay . . .

Taking a small loaf of bread from the tray, she broke off two pieces and split them in half. Spreading unsalted butter thickly over each piece, she felt her mouth watering.

'This is delicious,' she told Chris as he strolled back in. He pulled off his white apron and proceeded to wash his hands under a tiny brass tap over a minute sink in a far corner of the room.

'I didn't realize how hungry I was.'

'Come on,' he said, pulling off his cap, 'we'll eat it going along, while you try and remember the name of your hotel.'

'I have remembered. It's Ruiz.'

'Oh, so you're only as thick as one plank, then?'

Ignoring the remark, Kay walked by his side, wishing Pamela could see her with this tall, handsome hunk of a bloke. She thought he must be twenty-two or twenty-three.

'So how long are you gonna be working over here for?' Kay asked as she tucked into the warm buttered bread.

Taking her hand and guiding her round a small group of Spanish boys, Chris smiled at her. 'For good. Or for bad; depends which way you look at it.'

Once they were safely past the noisy gang, instead of letting go of Kay's hand, Chris locked their fingers. 'I didn't want to go into my father's restaurant business, so we decided to leave home and set up here, in our family's village. Not that it's much like a fishing village any more,' he said, looking into her face.

'We?' Kay wondered if he was married.

'My brother bought a small bicycle shop – we'll pass it soon – and I took over the bakery. Neither of us are married. We've been here for just over a year.'

'Sounds perfect.'

'It could be,' he said, giving her a studious look. 'You know what I'm going to tell my brother tonight?'

'No.' She felt his eyes on her face and prayed she wasn't blushing.

'I'm going to tell him that tonight a star fell from the sky and landed in my bakery.'

Kay raised her eyebrows and gave a slow smile. 'Not a poet as well, are you?'

'No. I mean what I say.' He squeezed her hand.

'Yeah, I'm sure.' She wasn't going to fall for that one.

'Come on.' His face was full of fun. 'I'll introduce you to him. I know exactly which bar he'll be in. He's in love with the blonde German waitress.'

Before Kay could object, Chris was running and pulling her along with him. His laughter filled the air, and it was contagious. She was laughing too, and feeling very happy.

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' he yelled.

'Yes, I do, as a matter of fact!' She remembered Zacchi.

'So do I,' he said. Then without warning, he suddenly swept her up into the air and swung her round.

Shrieking and laughing, she begged him to stop. People were looking. He brought her gently back down to earth and cupped her face in his hands. 'I don't care who's staring at us,' he murmured.

'Neither do I.' Kay was surprised at her own words, and even more surprised when she stood on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on his full lips.

'Come on. I want my brother to meet you.' He tousled her hair and then put his arm around her shoulder, leading her into the small bar.

Chris introduced Kay to his brother Charles and a few friends who were there. 'She . . . is only sixteen, only sixteen . . .' Charles began to sing.

'Seventeen, actually,' said Kay, playfully indignant. She liked Charles instantly; the eighteen-year-old was full of himself, and she could imagine Pamela would go for him in a big way.

'Oh, well then.' He folded his arms and smiled at her and Chris. 'I expect you'll want me to stay out of the apartment tonight?' Before either of them could say anything he leaned forward, pushing his face up close to Kay's. 'But only if I get a turn tomorrow.'

Chris and the rest of them began to laugh as Kay became suddenly aware that she was a stranger, and fearful of what she had walked into. Stepping back, nearer the door, she looked at Chris and saw him in a different light. Maybe the instincts she'd had in his shop were right. He was too good to be true. Remembering how she had allowed herself to get into a dangerous situation with Zacchi, she felt herself go numb. Turning quickly, she ran out of the bar, angry as much with herself as with them.

She ran a short distance, then stopped and looked back. No one was following her. Composing herself she asked an English couple if they could direct her to the Hotel Ruiz.

'Turn around,' the man gave her a relaxed smile. 'It's behind you!' he said, in true pantomime style.

Kay was so relieved she felt like hugging the couple. She thanked them and went through Reception to the hotel bar, and was even more relieved to see Pamela.

'Where 'ave *you* been?' Pamela was beside herself. 'I was just about to get the manager to phone the police!'

Kay sat on a stool at the bar and slowly shook her head. 'I'll tell you later, when we're in bed. Where's Romeo?'

'Sitting at the hotel switchboard, can you believe? Talk about Jack of all trades and working all hours.' Pamela looked at her watch. 'He'll be finished in just over an hour. I'm waiting for him.'

'It's nearly three in the morning, for God's sake. Can't we go to bed?'

'You can. I'm not stopping yer.' Pamela looked as if she really had had one drink too many.

'Please come with me. I don't want to go to the annexe by myself. I'm scared.'

'What of?' Pamela studied Kay's pale, frightened face and nodded slowly. 'Tell Pepe I'll see him tomorrow, will yer, Juan?'

Juan, the barman, pushed his thumb forward. 'OK! Swinging!' Norman Vaughan's catch-phrase had obviously reached Spain.

Slipping down from the bar stool, Pamela looked sideways at her friend. 'You OK?'

'More or less.' Linking arms, the girls left the main hotel building and made their way to the annexe.

'Where did you get to, then?'

'I found a bakery.'

'You what?' Pamela cut in. 'I'm starving!'

Laughing quietly, Kay took an elastic band from her pocket and pulled her hair back into a pony-tail. 'I met the baker as well.'

'Did they have any cakes?' Pamela stopped in her tracks.

'Warm cakes, yeah, and hot bread.'

'What are we waiting for then?'

'You wouldn't catch me going back. Not in a million years.' Kay carried on walking.

'Where is it? I'll go.' Pamela stood her ground.

Turning back to look at her friend, Kay thought about it. 'OK,' she said, 'we'll go, but there's somewhere else I want to go first. A bar. I've got something to settle. Come on, I'll tell you about it on the way.'

Surprised but pleased with Kay's sudden change of heart, Pamela slipped her arm through Kay's. 'I had a great time in the Cellar after you left. A gorgeous Frenchie asked me to dance. We're meeting him on the beach in the morning.'

'Oh *are* we?'

'We don't have to stay with them. It's very casual. It's not a date or anything.'

'You said *them*?' Kay looked suspiciously at her.

'Yeah. A whole load of French students. Staying on a camp site. It's party night every night by the sound of it.' Pamela looked as if she had already been in the sun. She was positively glowing.

'Anyway, enough about me – your turn! What's so special about this old baker man?'

Kay shrugged nonchalantly, tucking her red blouse into her denims. 'He's just a kindly old man, that's all.' She smiled to herself and suddenly felt in the mood for a bit of fun.

'I said she would be back!' Charles looked happy to see Kay.

'Don't fall off your ego,' Kay snapped, a sulky expression on her face. 'I came to set the record straight.' She turned to Chris who was sitting by himself at a small table. 'You insulted me.'

'Kay!' Pamela spoke in a low whisper. 'You don't talk like that to a *god*.' She couldn't believe her own eyes.

'He never said a word!' Charles looked pleadingly at Kay, 'It was me. *I* owe you an apology.'

Kay looked from Charles back to Chris and waited. Chris said nothing, just looked back at her. With a cool expression on his face he slowly raised his legs and stretched them out on top of the table in front of him.

'What's going on, Kay?' Pamela whispered in her ear.

'This lot had a good laugh at my expense!' she deliberately raised her voice.

Charles made a display of innocent frustration. 'It was a joke!' He glared at Chris. 'Tell her then!'

Chris folded his arms defiantly and chewed on the wooden toothpick stuck in the corner of his mouth.

'Well, I dunno what's going on,' Pamela said, 'but I fancy a cappuccino.' She perched herself on a bar stool and smiled at the blonde barmaid, Sieglinde. 'Make that two,' she said. 'One for Kay.'

Sieglinde gave Pamela a thumbs-up sign and smiled. 'That's good,' she said, 'a good move.'

Leaving Sieglinde to it, Pamela swung around and looked from Kay to Chris. They were glaring at each other.

'It must be love,' Charles whispered in Pamela's ear. They both enjoyed the scene and within seconds were chatting away.

The other Spanish lads looked at each other and waited to see which of them would give in first and speak. They knew it would be a mistake for any one of *them* to start flirting with Kay.

Suddenly swinging his legs off the table, Chris sauntered over to the jukebox and studied the labels. Making his choice, he then turned away and took up

his earlier pose, keeping himself to himself. Charles and the other lads looked at each other, wondering which record Chris had chosen. It could make or break a possible romance.

Kay joined Pamela at the bar and sipped her coffee, keeping her back to the vain, loathsome man she had foolishly allowed herself to kiss. She hated him for the way he was behaving, and wondered how she was going to leave the bar with dignity. As the record started to play she felt Pamela's eyes on her face and resisted the urge to smile. They all listened with interest as the music drifted through the bar. Recognizing the record, Sieglinde reached up to the controls above the counter and turned up the sound, giving Kay a cheeky wink as the lyrics of 'Venus in Blue Jeans' filled the room.

She's Venus in blue jeans,
Mona Lisa with a pony-tail
She's a walking, talking work of art
She's the girl who's stole my heart . . .
My Venus in blue jeans, is the Cinderella I adore . . .
She's my very special angel too
A fairy tale come true . . .

Resisting the urge to join in with the others, who had begun to pick up on the lyrics, Kay slowly swung

around and smiled back at Chris, who had his eyes fixed on her. His legs were no longer stretched out on the table.

They say there's seven wonders in the world,
But what they say is out of date.
There's more than seven wonders in this world . . .
I just met number eight . . .

Smiling, she walked towards Chris and took his outstretched hand. He pulled her down into the chair next to his.

'I suppose I'll have to walk you back to your hotel?' Charles grinned at Pamela.

'But no funny business!' She tossed back her long dark hair.

'Would that I dare?' he laughed. 'Don't want you setting Kay on me.'

'Never mind Kay,' Pamela stepped down from the bar stool. 'I can throw a good punch, you know.' She looked up into his cheeky face. 'Come on then, Goldilocks. I'm dead tired.'

'Tonight . . . they will make love on the beach.' A Spanish boy grinned.

'I think not,' said Sieglinde, drying glasses. 'Those girls are good.'

'You hope so, eh?'

'I am not worried. Two weeks, and the girl will be gone. I am here for a long time,' she shrugged.

It was almost four a.m. when Kay and Chris strolled hand in hand along the calm shore of the Mediterranean. 'You know what would be nice?' Gently he pulled Kay down on to the soft sand. 'If we could stay here and watch the sun come up.'

Kay curled herself into his strong, tanned arms. It was exactly what she had been thinking. 'Wake me up if I fall asleep,' she murmured.

'You won't fall asleep.' Chris kissed her gently on the mouth and she responded, her entire body beginning to throb with longing.

This was a new experience for Kay. Lying on a soft golden beach, waiting for dawn to break and listening to the sound of the sea lapping the shore. It was like a dream come true.

For Chris, it was just another holiday romance. Except that the girl lying next to him seemed different to all the others. She was natural and relaxing, comfortable to be with. It made him feel uneasy.

Chapter Six

Settling themselves in the living room by the gas fire, Laura and Jack tucked into their fish-and-chip supper and were enjoying an episode of *Coronation Street* on television. It had been a drizzling, grey day and Jack had stood for several hours outside the gates of the Royal Albert Dock. The mass meeting of dockers included men from Tilbury, Surrey and East India Docks.

Jack Dash, the union leader, had been there and spoken well. He had told the men that the situation in the Port of London was critical. He also confirmed that unregistered labour was being used at one of the wharves, while elsewhere, two thousand dockers could not obtain work.

'They're planning to fetch meat in by air, y'know?' Jack said, breaking off a small chunk of steaming hot crispy cod. 'Flying it in to Southend.'

'Oh yeah?' Laura tried to sound interested, but she

was involved in an argument going on between Ena Sharples and Annie Walker.

'Tilbury hasn't come out yet, but some of the Surrey men are with us. Bloody Joint Import Trades Committee sent a telegram to the Prime Minister requesting that importers get permission to unload their own cargoes! They want their bloody brains looked at.'

Making himself a chip sandwich, Jack tried to get interested in the weekly serial, but his mind was still full of the strike.

'Mead's going on about letting fleets of lorries into the docks to collect cargoes. I tell you, Laura, this country's gonna be in a sorry state if it goes on the way it is.'

'Try not to worry about it, Jack, eh?' Laura was bored with hearing about it.

A long ring on the doorbell broke into their thoughts. 'Who the hell's that?' Jack moaned.

'Might be Liz.' Laura hoped it was. Jack never went on about the strike when she was around. 'You get it, eh? I can't miss any of this. I think Annie Walker's gonna win.'

'It'd better be Liz,' Jack said, standing up. 'Anyone else can go for a quick walk. Especially if it's another Bible-basher.'

Pouring herself a glass of Tizer, expecting Liz to

walk in any minute, Laura focused on the row going on between her two favourite characters, ready to fill her sister-in-law in on the affairs of the Street.

Instead of coming back into the living room, Laura heard Jack go into the kitchen. She could hear men's voices and thought she recognized them. Opening the small serving-hatch between the rooms her heart sank when she saw Bert's two brothers, Frank and Freddie, sitting at the kitchen table.

'I'm just making a cup of tea, Laura. D'yer want one?' Jack looked far from happy.

'No, I'll wait till later. Don't forget your fish and chips,' she added, eyeing the brothers.

'All right, Laura?' Frank smiled.

'Fine thanks. You?'

'Could be better, but there you are. Heard from Kay yet?'

'Not yet, no, but I expect we will.' Laura managed a smile and nodded to Freddie before closing the hatch doors. Settling herself down again, she couldn't help wondering what the two villains wanted with Jack. She hoped he wasn't mixed up in anything that involved them.

'It's like old times, eh, Jack, us being 'ere in your flat.' Freddie said. 'I know we was here for the funeral, but that was different.'

'Last time before that was one Christmas a few

years ago. Bloody good party it was an' all. Bert sang 'is favourite song, naturally.'

All three men laughed at the memory. 'He didn't have a bad voice as it happens,' Jack said, pouring boiling water into the chrome teapot.

'No, you're right,' Frank lowered his head. 'I s'pose you're wondering why we're here?'

'If it's the envelope that's worrying yer?'

''Course not,' Frank cut in.

'I 'aven't given it to Liz yet, for a reason.'

'We didn't know you hadn't, Jack. That's not why we're 'ere.' Freddie rubbed his eyebrow. 'We 'aven't really felt right since we saw you in the Maurice. You looked a bit choked when you left.'

Jack felt like telling him that he wasn't upset, but angry. He thought better of it. 'I don't know if Liz'll take the cash, to tell you the truth. She can be a funny cow at times.' Jack poured milk into each cup.

'Beer money, Jack, that's all.'

Jack looked into Frank's suntanned face. 'Yeah?'

'Now that it's really sunk in about Bert,' Freddie began, quick to change the subject away from back-handers. 'He was a good bloke. We thought a lot of 'im.'

Frank covered his face with one hand. 'A fucking good brother as well.'

Freddie's eyes were filling with tears. 'We never saw much of 'im during the last couple of years. You know 'ow these things go. Families lose touch.'

Pouring the tea, Jack wondered what Frank and Freddie really wanted. They were upsetting him talking about Bert, and he wasn't sure how he would handle it if they had something else on their minds and were using his late best friend as a smokescreen.

'Bert was one of the best, Freddie. You only have to think back to the turnout at his funeral to see that. Anyway, what d'yer want with me?' He placed their tea in front of them and folded his arms, ready to stare them out if necessary.

'What you've just given us, Jack. A cup of tea and a chair.'

'If you two are winding me up, you can piss off now.' Jack could feel the blood pumping through his veins.

'We're not 'ere to wind you up,' Frank sighed. 'We miss Bert!'

'Fair enough . . . fair enough.' Jack sat down at the table and pulled his tobacco tin from his trouser pocket.

'You saw a lot of 'im, didn't yer?' Freddie said, wiping away a tear.

Jack sucked on his bottom lip and nodded, giving them the benefit of the doubt.

'He was happy enough, wasn't he? I mean, he didn't want for anything.'

'Drink your tea, Freddie. You're letting your emotions get the better of you.' Jack didn't need these two pouring their hearts out to him.

'How's Liz?' Frank blew his nose. 'She's all right, ain't she?'

'Doing 'er best. You know Lizzie.' He looked sideways at Frank. 'Well, you used to.'

'Don't be like that, Jack.' Freddie pulled a white envelope from his inside pocket. 'Don't you think we wished we'd 'ave visited them more often?' He dropped the envelope on the table. 'There's a bit more cash for Liz, and for you.' Freddie eyed Jack with caution.

Standing up, Freddie swallowed the remains of his tea. 'You ready, Frank?' He looked at his gold wrist-watch.

'Yep. We've got a little bit of business to see to, Jack. Otherwise we'd stay longer.'

With one hand on the kitchen door, Freddie turned and looked Jack in the eye. 'Sounds like the strike'll be over soon. You did the right thing.'

'Oh yeah?' Jack could feel his heart sink. 'What makes you say that?'

'Stands to reason. The attention's off of Bert. You've made things a lot more comfortable for us.' He held his hand out to shake Jack's.

'If you wanna use them notes to take Liz and Laura on a nice holiday abroad, that's fine by us.'

Before Jack could tell them to take their filthy money, the two brothers were out of the kitchen, heading for the front door.

'See yer, Jack!' Freddie called over his shoulder.

'Say hallo to Liz for us!' Frank added.

The street door slammed shut behind them. Jack shuddered. He stared at the white envelope in his hand. *Beer money*. That's what they had called it. Beer money.

Laura leaned in the kitchen doorway and folded her arms. 'Forget it, Jack. They're not worth losing sleep over.'

Jack looked up at her. His white face said it all. He was too bitter to speak. The only reason for Bert's brothers to call round was in the envelope. The second payment. The other half of the bribe.

'I feel like burning it, Laura.'

Snatching it up, Laura pushed it into her cardigan pocket. 'We'll tell Liz about it and let her decide. If we don't want this, Jack, there are a lot of people who will. People who won't know or care where it comes from so long as it puts clothing on their kids' backs.'

Jack laughed at her quietly. 'You gonna stand on the corner of Brick Lane Sunday morning and give it away, I s'pose?'

'All we 'ave to do is split it up and pop envelopes through doors. I know a lot of families on this estate who'd appreciate hard cash.'

Jack sighed heavily. 'It's filth money, Laura. From London scum.'

'Oh come on, Jack! *You're* so innocent?'

'No I'm not! I've nicked stuff from the docks and no doubt I'll do it again, but that's different! A box of Jersey spuds? A crate of oranges? Perks! They expect it!'

Laura knew it wasn't just the history of the money that was tormenting Jack, it was the reason it had been given that was tearing him apart. He believed in the strike, and wanted to be on his soapbox urging the men not to give in. And then there was his pride. Bert's two flash brothers had kicked it about as if it were an old tin can, and then crushed it flat.

'Come on. Come and cuddle up on the sofa.' She stroked his thick blond hair and pushed her slim fingers into his neck, gently massaging away his troubles.

Looking up at her with his light blue eyes, Jack reminded Laura of Kay and another worry swept

through her. She prayed she would be all right abroad, with all those foreigners.

Wrapped in each other's arms on the sofa, later that night, Jack and Laura were quiet. They had turned off the television, the lights were down low and they were listening to their favourite record, Nat King Cole singing 'Unforgettable'.

'I don't really understand why they gave you that money, Jack,' Laura said, after a while. 'Why don't they want the strike to go on? What's it to them?'

'It's probably all down to one warehouse keeper. Frank and Freddie are members of a certain firm, and that firm is probably involved in importing tea . . . sugar.'

'Yeah? So?'

'The tea and sugar doesn't come over in little bags.'

'I know that. Get to the point!'

'Well, hidden amongst all those billions of tea leaves and grains of sugar there'll be something else far more valuable.'

Laura sat up and stared, disbelievingly, into Jack's face. 'Drugs?'

'Now you know why it's scum money.' Jack reached for his tobacco tin.

'Blimey, Jack. It never occurred to me.' She shook her head slowly. 'Are you sure?'

'Why d'yer think some of them use casual labour when it suits 'em?'

'And you know this for a fact, do yer?'

'Common sense.'

'Are you saying that's the reason why this strike started up? That the wharf manager took a man on because they were running drugs and he was part of it?'

'No, of course not. That company's got nothing to do with it. It's the other one or two warehouses, here and there, who discourage the dockers from striking in their own sweet way. They wouldn't want anything to hold up the trafficking.'

'Bloody hell. I'm glad you've taken a back seat, Jack. You could 'ave ended up with your face slit.' Laura dropped her head back on to a cushion.

'Don't be silly. They don't do things like that. I would 'ave just disappeared, that's all. Man Missing Presumed to have Run Off with his Mistress.' Jack was trying to turn it into a joke.

'You could still 'ave 'ad your throat cut.' She felt a shiver run down her spine.

'Nar. A bullet through the 'ead, maybe,' he chuckled, lighting a roll-up.

'It's not funny, Jack.'

'You're telling me.' Jack didn't think any of it was funny. The East End had always had its thieves,

its gangs, but the past decade had seen America filtering through. Mafia-style firms were becoming more established.

'You know, I wouldn't mind getting out of this country. Emigrate to Australia.'

'Oh leave off, Jack,' Laura laughed, 'you? Emigrate? You nearly threw a fit when I suggested we all went to Spain for a holiday! If ever there was a home-bird, it's you.'

'Yeah well, I do love this country and I think it's worth working and fighting for.' He sighed and shook his head. 'It's corrupt, Laura. Corruption runs through every establishment you can think of. Even the Law.'

'Maybe it's the same in other countries?'

'Maybe. Don't make it right though, does it?'

'I dunno, Jack. Right pair we are. How often do we sit here like this without having to worry about Kay crashing in any second?'

He grinned at her. 'Funny you should say that.'

'I thought you'd never ask.' Easing herself further down the sofa, Laura stretched out one leg, allowing her silky green skirt to rise above the top of her black suspender. 'Not bad for thirty-nine,' she teased.

Jack ran one finger from her knee upward and moved his hand across her flat stomach. 'You know what I'm gonna do tonight?'

'Tell me,' she kissed his neck and let her legs fall slightly apart.

'I'm gonna kiss every inch.' He began to unbutton her dress. 'Yep, every inch, if it takes all night.' He lowered his head and filled his mouth with her erect nipple, sucking and licking, sending a wave of delicious craving through her body.

Looking into her soft green eyes, Jack pushed his hand under her, cupping and squeezing, gently playing with the soft, dark curls between her legs. Then, easing her off the sofa and on to the rug in front of the gas fire, he began slowly to take off her clothes.

Chapter Seven

Liz had taken to Joe on her first day working in the canteen at Hammond's. He was the only one, it seemed, who could make her laugh and bring her out of a blue mood. Joe from maintenance, as he was known, was also on his own. His wife had died three years previously and to fill the gap he had joined a spiritualist group.

That evening the meeting was taking place in Rose Davenport's living room, and from the moment Liz entered the clean and polished two up two down, she wished she hadn't. Telling herself that this would be her last session, she sat at the round dining table feeling easier, knowing she would not have to put up with Rose's snobby ways after tonight. She was worse than some of the women who worked in Hammond's.

'We don't seem to understand who the message is for. Could you please spell out the name of the person

you wish to contact?' Rose's shrill voice broke the silence.

'I think someone else should be the contact,' Joe said quietly.

'Don't be silly, Joe. It just needs a bit more time, that's all. Come on.' Rose urged the spirit; 'Stop wasting our time!'

'You'll make it angry, Rosie. You've got to coax, not demand.' Joe took his finger off the glass.

'Oh, no that *won't* do, Joe! You've broken the link now.' Rose was beginning to lose her patience.

'I don't think it's going to work this evening,' Mary, the eighty-year-old, had had enough. 'I'm desperate for a pee and a cup of cocoa.' They always had hot chocolate after a chat with the spirits. 'Why don't we stop, eh?' She looked at Liz for support.

'Well, let's see if we can decipher what I've written first.' Rose was in before Liz had a chance. Pushing the paper towards Joe, she crossed her arms defiantly and eyed Liz. 'I think we have a non-believer in the room.'

Liz was only too pleased to make her escape into the kitchen. 'I'll make the cocoa if you like. Then you can get on with it.'

'Sit down, Lizzie. We're not finished yet. And anyway, it's Rosie's night to make the drinks.'

'You were going too bloody fast, Rose. There's

not one space in between these letters.' Joe tried to break and separate words from the continuous lines of scribble.

'If I'm not back in five minutes,' old Mary said, switching the lights on, 'start without me. I think that chocolate Ex-Lax is beginning to work, Liz.'

Liz smiled inwardly at Rose's loud sigh of disgust and wondered if she might come to just one more meeting after all. Lovely old Mary crossing swords with this woman was worth coming out in the rain for. She knew the old girl did it on purpose, slipping in what Rose would refer to as a *vulgarism* here and there.

'*YaK K hctaw*? It must mean something, it's repeated that three times.' Joe said.

'Let me see that!' Rose snatched the paper away. 'Well it's obvious what's happened! I sometimes do mirror writing when I'm in touch.'

'Well,' Joe looked thoughtful, 'if you have been writing backwards, Rosie, and nothing would surprise me, this message could be for you, Liz. *Watch K Kay*.'

Liz took the piece of paper from Joe. 'You could be right, you know. Let's give it another go.'

Enthusiasm was never far away with this group; within seconds they had their fingers poised over the glass.

'We'll wait for Mary,' Liz said. 'And I'll take down the message this time, as it's for me.'

No one could argue with that, not even Rose, who hid her feelings of rejection quite well. 'Someone should call up to that woman and ask if she's going to be there all night!'

Without wasting a moment, Liz was up and in the doorway. 'Is the chocolate working, Mary?'

'Yes! It's wonderful! I don't want to come down, start without me!'

Back in her place, eyes closed, head bowed, finger on the glass at the centre of the table, Liz took a deep breath and began. 'I'm sorry we broke away when you were trying—'

'Ask it if there's a message for anyone in the room!' Rose cut in.

Containing her impatience, Liz took another deep breath. 'If you do have a message for any one of us, please spell it out and I'll do my best to write it down.'

The glass moved quickly around the edge of the mirror, stopping at letters of the alphabet which had been marked on with Rose's black eyebrow pencil. Keeping her index finger in contact with the sherry glass, Liz carefully wrote down the message until the glass came to a pause.

'Lights!' ordered Rose.

'There's enough light.' Liz stared down at the notebook. 'Give me a minute,' she murmured.

'If this is a message from my Bert about our Kay, it's a bit muddled.' She slowly began to read. *Watch K K Watch her Trouble K Watch her.*

'I think I've had enough for one night.' Liz stood up and looked at her new friend. 'You don't have to leave yet, Joe, if you don't want to.'

Easing back into his chair, Joe looked at the others. 'As if I'd let you go through the backstreets by yourself.' Pulling his cap on and rising from the table, he turned to the others. 'See you in a fortnight. Keep smiling.'

Making their way along Vallance Road, stepping around small puddles, Liz and Joe enjoyed the warm evening air after rain. The smell of baking bread wafting along the narrow cobbled street made Liz feel hungry. 'I could eat a nice hot bagel, Joe. I'm—' Before she could finish the sentence, he was guiding her into the Blue and White all-night Jewish bakery.

Thankfully the little corner shop wasn't too busy. Just a couple of taxi-drivers enjoying a chat. 'This your new girlfriend, Joe?' one of them joked.

'I'm old enough to be your mother and you're young enough to go across my knee,' Liz returned, eyeing the cheesecake behind the glass counter.

'Well, let's hope you've got plenty of money.'

'Wouldn't mind a piece of that apple strudel, Becky,' Liz asked, wondering at the taxi-driver's last remark.

'I s'pose she's the reason we haven't seen you at the last two card games, eh, Joe?' The man wasn't going to leave it be.

'Nar,' Joe slowly shook his head. 'My prostate's been on the blink again.'

'Go on! Funny that. You've always seemed fit as a fiddle and twice as sharp. Still, I always did think you was a bit deep.'

Paying for her bagels and apple strudel, Liz bade them goodnight and she and Joe left the shop, a nagging doubt at the back of her mind. Was the taxi-driver trying to tell her something?

Turning on the fire in the small living room, Liz told Joe to pull the armchair up close to the heat while she put the kettle on. 'There's some rum in the sideboard if you fancy a drop.'

'I've been thinking,' he said, following her into the kitchen. 'I've got no money, Liz, and no sex to offer yer, but . . .' he took a deep breath, 'I'm yours if you want me.'

Smiling, Liz turned to face him. 'That's a lovely offer, Joe love, but it's a bit too soon.'

'Oh, I don't mean yet. Gawd, no. In time. If you

fancy a bit of company in the evenings. Someone there in the mornings.'

'Ask me again in a year, eh?' She kissed him lightly on the side of his face.

'So you don't mind, then? You know, about the . . .'

'Sex? 'Course I don't. I've got no interest in all that now. And as for the money, well, I've got none either and never have had. So what I haven't had I can't miss, can I?'

'That's true, Liz, that's true.'

'But to be honest, the pictures would suit me better than them bloody seances you keep taking me to.' She placed two mugs on a tray. 'Bert wouldn't really have approved and, well, it does upset me a bit, to tell you the truth.'

'Ah, you're just a bit upset over that message about Kay, that's all.'

'No,' she chuckled, 'I was pushing it with my finger the second time round. I'd had enough of that bloody Rose woman.'

Later that night, as Liz lay in her darkened bedroom, she couldn't help thinking about the taxi-driver. There was a look on his face, and she couldn't fathom what had been behind it. Sighing, she turned over and eased her shoulder under the soft feather pillow and tried not to worry about her Kay in a

foreign land. She had only told Joe a half-truth about pushing the glass. She had started to force it towards the letters but then it seemed to have a life of its own, moving by itself, regardless of Liz's fingers.

For the next two days, until her niece was home, safe and sound, Liz knew that the feeling of dread inside her would stay right where it was.

Chapter Eight

'It's me, Kay!' the voice screeched over the telephone. 'We're at Dover!'

'It's all right, Kay,' Laura laughed, 'you don't have to shout.' Laura was choked at hearing her daughter's voice again. 'What time will you be arriving at Victoria?'

'I dunno! There's trouble with the trains so I'm gonna be late whatever happens. You won't have to meet me. We've been offered a ride in a taxi.'

'What d'yer mean, offered a ride? Who with?'

'This man and woman we met on the boat. They live near Aunt Liz. They know her. Alf and Sarah. I'll have to go, Mum. Wait up for me, won't you?'

''Course we'll wait up for you,' Laura swallowed tears, 'I can't wait to see your silly freckled face.'

That Friday evening seemed the longest in Laura's life. Sitting beside Jack on the sofa, she tried to get absorbed in the television; *Take Your Pick.*

Lighting her second cigarette, she rehearsed to herself how she would deliver the news to Jack about Kay's holiday and where she had actually been. Time was running out and she would have to speak up soon. Kay might knock on the door any minute.

'What's with the chain-smoking?' Jack said casually, his eyes on the screen. 'What's on your mind?'

There was a moment's silence as Laura plucked up courage and searched for the right words. Jack was a placid man most of the time but experience had seen him flare up within seconds and take days to calm down.

'I'll tell you after this show,' she said, giving herself breathing space.

'That bad, eh?'

Loud banging on the front door startled them both. Jack peered across at Laura, his eyes narrowed. 'If that's not the copper's knock I don't know what is.' He pulled himself out of his armchair.

'Don't be daft,' Laura's face lit up, 'it's Kay!'

'No, that's not her.' Jack pulled his braces over his shoulders, sucking on his bottom lip. 'There's nothing I should know before I open that door, is there?' he asked, with more than a touch of worry in his voice. 'You've been on edge for a couple of days now.'

'No, of course not.' Jumping up quickly, Laura's hand flew to her face. 'Oh Christ! There's still a carton of cigarettes in the wardrobe!'

'No there's not. I got rid of 'em this afternoon.'

While Jack made for the street door, Laura stood in the darkened passageway, listening.

'Mr Armstrong?' she heard one of two uniformed officers ask.

'May we come in, sir?'

'I hope you're not the bringer of bad news? We've had more than our fair share lately.' Jack spoke in a low voice.

'There hasn't been an accident, sir. Nothing like that. We'd just like a few words with your daughter, Kay.'

'Oh yeah?'

Laura felt her heart sink as she recognized dread in Jack's voice. Something was wrong. Something bad had happened.

'If we could come in, sir? It shouldn't take long.'

Closing the door behind them, Jack led the way into the front room. Laura's brain worked nineteen to the dozen. She couldn't imagine Kay getting up to anything, not on holiday.

'I take it she has arrived back from her holiday, sir?'

'No, as a matter of fact she's late.'

Laura silently prayed that they hadn't found out about Kay forging Jack's signature on her passport form. Staring into their solemn faces, she heard herself telling them to sit down as she switched off the television.

'So what's my seventeen-year-old been up to, then?' Jack smiled. Trying to hide his concern, he dropped into his armchair and picked up his tobacco tin from the coffee table.

'We believe she's involved in something quite serious.'

Laura turned icy cold, unable to do anything but stare at the policeman who seemed at ease with the silence that hung heavy in the room.

'According to information given by her colleagues at work, your daughter was due home today?'

'That's right,' Jack lit a roll-up. 'Should be in any minute. We was getting a bit worried, as it happens. She is on the late side.' He drew on his cigarette. 'What's she been up to at work then?'

'What makes you ask that, sir?' asked the younger police officer.

'Stands to reason. You went there before you came 'ere.'

'She's under suspicion of theft,' the second officer added.

Jack roared with nervous laughter, then looked at

Laura and winked. Kay stealing? It was out of the question. 'What she s'posed to 'ave pinched then?'

'A pay packet's gone missing from the office where your daughter works. So far our inquiries lead us to believe that she might've taken it.' The officer shrugged and gave Jack a half-smile. 'Maybe she was a bit short of pesetas?'

Jack shook his head and grinned. 'You're barking up the wrong tree, mate. Kay's no thief. And she would hardly need pesetas on Sheppey.'

'You mean the Isle of Sheppey?' The officer looked across at his colleague. 'We were told she'd gone to Spain.'

'Do me a favour – Spain. She'd need a passport for that.'

Laura studied Jack's face, and when he smiled reassuringly back at her she was filled with remorse, knowing that at any second it would have to come out that she and Kay had gone behind his back. It would be devastating.

'You're confusing our Kay with someone else,' he said.

'I don't think we are.' The officer caught Laura's eye and waited. It was obvious from his expression that he knew she had something on her mind.

'She did go to Spain, Jack,' Laura murmured, keeping her eyes fixed on the floor.

Looking at his watch, the police officer sighed. 'Perhaps we'll call back tomorrow. I except her plane was late in.'

'What you talking about? How could she go abroad without a passport?' Then, as it dawned on him, Jack threw his head back as if he'd been struck by lightning, and swore. He shook his head slowly. 'Stone me. I never thought you'd go behind my back and sign that form.'

There was a tense silence and the officers looked from one to the other.

'What right did you 'ave to undermine me like that?' Full of anger, Jack couldn't see the warning looks Laura was giving him. She wanted to scream at him, tell him to keep quiet. Tell him to think before he spoke. But knowing that was one of Jack's weaker points, she began to get angry herself. He was playing his usual game of turning things around so that she was at fault. She had seen it before, many times. Now he was pushing it too far.

'You can be a silly bitch at times. D'yer think I didn't 'ave my reasons for not wanting her to go out there? She could 'ave got dragged off by some sodding—'

'I never undermined yer! She did! And all because you wouldn't let her go! She signed your name on

the form!' Laura screamed at him. 'It's *your* bloody fault! If you wasn't so stubborn.'

'She forged her father's signature? On a passport form?' The officer spoke slowly, emphasizing each word. 'And you don't think she's capable of taking a bit of spending money?' He turned to his colleague and a look passed between them.

'I think we'll wait for her to come in.' He sank back on the settee and folded his arms. 'Let's hope she's not too long.'

Clutching the handle of her suitcase, Kay waved goodbye to Alf and Sarah as the taxi pulled away from the grounds of the flats. It had just gone nine p.m. and as tired as she was, she couldn't wait to show off the presents she had brought back.

Pressing the lift button she felt excited at being back home in Stepney. The *No spitting* sign on the brick wall was like a welcome-home plaque, and the familiar smell of flowers from the cottage gardens opposite brought a smile to her face. The holiday had been wonderful. A dream come true. But it was good to be back, even if it did feel chilly. Almost as exciting as leaving in the first place. And Spain would always be there. Spain with its night life and eternal sun. Spain with its promise of a lifetime for her and Chris – running a small chain of bakeries.

Pulling the lift door open, she dragged her suitcase out and carried it to the front door. Finding the bell in the dark she held her finger on it for longer than she would normally, to announce her arrival.

It was a grim-faced Laura who opened the door. 'Hallo, Kay. I'm afraid we've . . .' unable to say any more, Laura reached out and drew her in. 'Oh, Kay. What have you done?'

'Mum?' Kay pulled back and looked into the haunted face. 'Dad's not that angry with me, is he?'

'No, love. He's not angry with yer.' She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. 'Push your suitcase up against the passage wall.'

'But the presents. Can't I give 'em to you now?'

'Later, Kay. We've got visitors.'

When Kay saw the policemen, her heart sank. Had someone else died? Were they there to break the news?

'Kay, there's been some trouble at Thompson's. A wage packet's been stolen.'

A broad grin swept across Kay's face. 'At Thompson's? God. Trust me to miss all the drama.' She smiled at the two policemen. 'I don't know how I can help. I've been away. I've just got back from Spain.' Glancing at her dad, she lowered her eyes.

'So we gather. It came as a surprise to your father.'

The officer's tone and dour expression made it clear that they were not amused. 'We understand from your parents that your passport was obtained by a forged application form?'

Kay looked from Laura to Jack. Surely they hadn't betrayed her?

'They found out from your mates at work, Kay,' Laura murmured.

The senior officer looked from his watch to his assistant who seemed to read his mind. A brief nod passed between them. 'Kay Armstrong—'

'*No!*' Laura's green eyes were wide and full of fear. 'You can't do this!'

Grabbing Laura's arm, Jack swallowed hard. 'Leave it, Laura.' His instincts were to the fore. He had read the expression on the officers' faces and knew what was coming. Furious as he was, his only thoughts now were for Kay and how best to support her through the next few hours.

Pulling Kay in close, Jack felt a sudden surge of emotion, as though an electric current was passing through his body. They were going to arrest Kay. They were going to take his girl in for questioning.

'What's going on? Dad? What's happening?'

'Kay Armstrong, I am arresting you on suspicion of theft and forgery. You are not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so. But what

you do say may be put in writing and given in evidence.'

'You can't do that,' Laura cut in, defying them to argue with her. 'You dare take my child away!'

'We'll be taking your daughter to King's Cross police station where she'll be questioned properly.'

Trembling, Jack nodded. 'I'll get my coat,' he managed to say, throwing a sheepish glance at Laura.

'I don't understand!' Kay's face became distorted and she burst into tears. 'I haven't done anything, I don't know what you're talking about.' She backed away and began to sob. 'You can't take me away! Dad, tell them! Tell them I'm not a thief!'

'It's all right, Kay, it's all right.' Jack moved towards Kay as her hand went for the veranda door. With one quick movement he reached out and grabbed her, pulling her in close. 'It's a mistake, babe. We'll get it sorted.'

'But they're arresting me! They're gonna put me in prison! You've got to stop it!' She was still gripping the handle of the glass doors. Dropping from the back balcony was one way of escape and Kay's mind was racing.

'No they're not, silly.' Jack stroked her hair. 'They just need to ask you a few questions, that's all.'

'Well let them ask me then.' She turned to the

police officers. 'Ask me anything you like. You don't need to take me with you.' She looked at each of the solemn faces. 'What am I supposed to have done?'

Jack knew it would be useless trying to soft-soap these two. They had their job to do and as far as he could tell, little scenarios like this left them cold. He silently prayed to God that Kay hadn't been silly enough to steal that money. He would rather die than see her cross-examined in a court of law.

A stream of words poured from Kay as they journeyed from Stepney to north London in the back of the squad car. As she sat between Laura and Jack, she turned from one to the other for reassurance.

'But you must know something, Dad? Whose salary went missing? What does Mr Grieves think? He knows I'm honest. I handle loads of money every fortnight. I've never taken a penny, they know that.' She had stopped crying but her voice was shaky and she was trembling from top to toe.

'They wouldn't trust me with all that cash if they thought I was a thief.'

'Never mind trust! They shouldn't 'ave given a seventeen-year-old that kind of responsibility. You

wait till this is over. I'll have something to say to that company!' Jack looked as if he might put his fist through a window.

The interview room at King's Cross was small, with just a few chairs and a small wooden table, a far cry from Laura and Jack's front room where they should have been at that moment.

Carrying a tray of hot tea, a uniformed officer arrived and his comforting smile eased the atmosphere. 'Would you like a biscuit? They're not very exciting.'

'No thank you,' Kay murmured, and started to cry again. The well-meant kindness was all it had taken to trigger her off.

Setting the tray down, the officer left the room and was instantly replaced by the arresting officer and the station sergeant.

While Laura looked as though she might pass out any minute, Jack's fists were clenched with anger. The officer was reporting to the sergeant his grounds for arresting Kay, and making it sound worse than it was. They were talking about her as if she were a criminal.

Once that was over, Laura and Jack were asked to leave the interview room and wait in the foyer while the female officer searched Kay and recorded her details.

'Your daughter will be interviewed by the detective constable and should he feel there is enough evidence against her, she will be charged and released on bail. If she's cooperative, it shouldn't take too long.' The constable threw Jack a look, advising him to leave him to it.

Taking Laura by the arm and avoiding his daughter's searching eyes, Jack led his wife out of the room.

The silence weighed heavily in the small room while the detective constable sat on the other side of the table and placed the red receipt book down, watching Kay for her reaction.

'How did that get here?' She stared down at the book. 'That's the salary receipt. I keep that in my top drawer, in my desk.'

Looking into Kay's face, DC McCormack sipped his tea. 'You do understand why you're here?'

'No, I don't, actually. I thought that you were only allowed to drag criminals into a place like this!' Knowing she was overstepping the mark, she added quickly, 'I s'pose for all you know I *am* a criminal.'

'You were brought in under suspicion of theft of a wage packet, and forging an official document.' Before she could interrupt, he quickly reminded her that she was still under caution. His stern voice

and strong presence caused Kay to cower in her chair.

Keeping his eyes lowered, the DC thumbed through the pages and then stopped. 'Can you tell me why you made this alteration, Kay?' He looked straight into her face.

Through watery eyes, she focused on the line written in the book and suddenly blushed as she remembered making the mistake. She leaned forward in her chair as she scene came flooding back. 'Mr Woods's salary?' Her voice was tinny. There was a pause while they waited for her to continue, but her mind was racing as she slipped back in time. There had been something about that moment. Something about the expression on the face of Stephen Drake when he asked her what she would do about Mr Woods's salary, since he was on holiday.

'It went by registered post.'

'That doesn't answer my question.'

'What question?' Kay had lost touch with the present; she was still back there in the office on that Friday afternoon.

'Why did you alter this entry?' He pointed to the line in question.

'It was a mistake.' She was remembering clearly now. 'I thought Mr Drake was from Mail Service but he wasn't. He was from Bought Ledger.' She smiled.

It had been a silly mistake after all. Soon she would be home and in her bed.

'Go on.'

'I wrote down eight salaries, then I was going to put Mail Service but I remembered where he was from, crossed out the M, and put Bought Ledger.' She was even beginning to enjoy the fact that she could throw light on the mystery.

'I see.' He sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin. 'So what happened to Mr Woods's salary, Kay?'

'He was on holiday. So it went by registered post.' She sipped her tea and began to enjoy the feeling of relief which was taking over from the turmoil inside.

'But Mr Woods never received it.'

Kay shrugged. 'Must 'ave got lost in the post, then.'

'Registered envelopes don't get lost. That's the point of having them registered in the first place.' He was taking on a more serious tone. 'And when your boss, Mr Grieves, checked with the post room, there was no sign of his name in the book. And the girl in the office couldn't remember seeing an envelope for him.'

'Well there was one. I remember typing it. And I remember pointing it out to Mr Drake when he asked about it.'

'You showed him the envelope?'

'No, I showed him my list of names of the staff whose salaries had to go by registered post.'

'Why didn't you show him the registered envelope?'

'I don't know!' He was beginning to irritate her. 'The list was there, right in front of me.'

'So you're saying that you definitely remember typing the envelope, putting the salary in and taking that, with the others, into the post room and giving all of them to Sylvia?'

'Yeah.' Kay smiled again. 'Ask Sylvia, she'll tell yer.'

'We did, and like I said, she doesn't remember it.'

There was another pause while Kay racked her brain. She didn't want to get her friend in trouble. Maybe Sylvia had taken the salary?

'Your father tells us you're not averse to a little forgery now and again?'

Kay bent her head, realizing that her foolish idea had turned out to be more serious than she had dreamed possible.

'Did you or did you not forge your father's name on an official document? An application form for a passport!' He was angry now. Angry, demanding and impatient.

Kay could feel the blood rushing to her face again. 'Yes,' she murmured.

'I'm sorry,' he said, cocking one ear, 'I didn't hear that.'

'I did!'

'You must have known that was a serious criminal act.' He leaned back in his chair and grinned. 'You've got some nerve, I'll say that. It takes a brazen face to pull off something like that.'

'It was the only way.'

'Mmmmm . . . and there's not much point being in a place like Spain if you've no pocket money.'

'I had pocket money. We're not exactly on poor street, you know.'

Giving her a warning look, the officer continued. 'Did you take Mr Woods's salary, Kay?'

'No. I'm not a thief.'

'But you are a forger? And some would say that's even more serious than stealing. What did you do with the empty registered envelope?'

'I took it to the post room with the salary in it.'

'But we've questioned three people in the post room. None of them can remember seeing it. Where did you get the money from to pay for this holiday abroad?'

'I worked for it.'

'But Thompson's only pay you seven pounds ten shillings a week.'

'I got another job. In the evenings. In the sweet shop.'

'Your boss doesn't seem to know anything about that. No one that we spoke to mentioned it. Seems a bit strange.'

'We're not meant to have a second job. Company policy.'

'So you're a liar too.'

'I am not!' Kay's voice was cracking, but she willed herself to stay calm. She wasn't going to let him beat her down.

'You told them you were breaking the rules, did you?'

'No. I didn't tell them anything. I would have got the sack if they'd found out.'

'You know what I think?' He leaned forward, pushed the red receipt book under her nose and slowly tapped the altered entry with his finger. 'I think you wrote *Salaries seven. Bought Ledger.* And that's what the young man signed for. Once he had left the office, you made the seven look like an M and wrote *eight* down next to it.'

Kay only took in half of that. She was more concerned with him saying that Stephen Drake had signed for eight. 'I remember now!' She sat up, a

smile on her face. 'I remember! He stood there and counted the salaries, they all do. They have to, before they sign. Then he asked me again what was gonna happen to Mr Woods's. He must have seen it there! I must have put it in the collection group instead of the registered envelope batch.'

'But you said you also remember typing the registered envelope. And putting the salary in. And taking it to the post room!'

'Well I got confused! You keep confusing me! I remember filling the envelopes. I can't be expected to remember every name! I don't know, I must have made a mistake!'

'So that leaves the empty registered envelope that you typed. Where do you think that is?'

'I don't know. Maybe I never typed one out for him! Maybe I forgot! Why don't you talk to Mr Drake?'

'We have. He flatly denies seeing a pay packet for Mr Woods. And I believe him. He also swears you didn't alter that entry while he was there.' The inspector raised one eyebrow and stared into Kay's flushed face. There was a long pause.

'Kay Armstrong, I am now going to have to charge you.'

'No!' Kay cried, 'No! I didn't do it! It's not fair!' As Kay stood up, moved behind her chair

and picked it up, McCormack's colleague was in like a flash, seizing her by the arms. The stream of words seemed to strike out and hit the centre of her stomach, sending flashes of white light and a million sparks up through her head.

Kay remembered little of the journey back to Stepney in the taxi. Sitting in the armchair in front of the gas fire at home, she didn't want to think about King's Cross police station. She would try to wipe it out for ever.

'D'yer want me to unpack for you, Kay? Or would you rather wait till the morning?'

'I'll wait.'

'You sure you don't want to show me your gifts?' Laura was doing her best to cheer Kay up.

'Give it a rest, Laura,' Jack said, 'it'll soon be bloody morning.'

'Yeah, don't feel like it though, does it? I don't know about you, but I can't see myself sleeping yet.'

'I'm gonna have to go through all that again.' Kay stared into the glow of the gas fire.

'Oh, no you're not!' snapped Jack. 'There'll be a solicitor present next time.'

'What good will that do? I'm a forger. I even admitted it.' She gazed up at him, almost trance-like. 'What does bail mean, Dad? I don't really understand.'

Jack rubbed his forehead and sighed. 'I dunno. They need time to investigate. Make more inquiries. It's all down to form-filling, I s'pose. Anyway, you're here and not locked up in a cell, that's something.'

The room fell quiet as the three of them gazed into the blue and yellow flames of the fire.

'How's aunt Liz?' Kay rubbed her swollen eyes, which were puffy from crying.

'She's all right. Been talking to your uncle Bert again,' he laughed. Catching Laura's eye and her scowl, he tried to keep a straight face. 'She's gonna drive us mad now, you wait and see.'

'Why?' Kay asked.

'Saw it all coming, didn't she? Reckons Bert sent her a message a couple of days ago. "Kay, watch Kay, trouble".'

'Dad!' Taking a sudden interest, Kay cupped her mug. 'You're kidding me?'

'Does seem strange, I must admit,' Jack conceded.

'Strange, nothing! She was worried about Kay being abroad, that's all. It was on her mind.'

'Yeah, I s'pose you're right.' Lying back in the armchair, Jack stared out. 'I might go with 'er one night. Wouldn't mind a word with Bert.' He ignored Laura's sigh. 'I wonder if Mum and Dad are with

him? Or our dog, even? Do dogs bark in heaven? That's the question.'

That was too much for Kay. She started to laugh. 'Be a noisy bloody place if they did.'

'Come on then. Let's see what you've dragged back from half way across the world.' Jack had achieved his goal, seeing the smile back on his daughter's pinched face.

'I haven't got the energy,' Kay said, hoping he would get the suitcase for her.

'We'll 'ave to wait till tomorrow then, won't we.' He sniffed and stretched his long legs.

'No you will not!' Kay jumped up from her armchair and marched out of the room. 'You'll look at everything now.'

'That was mean, Jack. You could have got it for her.'

'I know that, Laura.' He grinned and winked at her.

'Oh, right. Yeah. It worked too.' She chuckled then drew a deep breath. 'Talk about two peas in a pod.' She sipped her tea. 'What a life, eh?'

'It's only what you make it, Laura,' he said, looking up at the ceiling, wondering if she would remember her telling him that once.

She managed not to smile. 'It's not very nice when it crumbles before you though, is it?' She repeated

the answer he had made two years ago when they were going through a crisis in their marriage.

It amused Jack that she had remembered, and surprised him. Laura was just as deep as he was, then?

Chapter Nine

The following Monday morning before Kay left for Thompson's, she and Laura shared a gloomy breakfast, sitting in the kitchen.

'I don't want to go.' Kay broke off a piece of toast. 'They probably all think I did it.' Feeling sick inside, she sipped some water, hoping it would ease the nausea.

'You don't have any choice, Kay. If you don't go to work as normal it'll make you look guilty.' Laura tipped cold tea from the teapot into the sink. 'Try and eat a bit of that toast, love. You've hardly touched anything all weekend.'

'I can't. It'll get stuck in my throat again.' She dropped the toast on to her plate.

'My gut feeling is to go with you. Take a day off work. Mondays are always quiet. They'd give me the time off, I'm sure of it.'

'No. If I have to go, I'll go by myself.' Kay

dragged herself from the kitchen chair. 'I've got nothing to hide.'

'No. Someone has though, Kay, and wouldn't it be great if you found out who took that money?'

'Yeah. I s'pose it would.'

'You don't have to tell them you've been charged.'

'Oh yes I do!' A surge of defiance rose inside her. 'I'm gonna make sure everyone knows before they find out and whisper behind my back. Yeah, I'll go in. I'll show them. Don't you worry, Mum. They're not gonna get away with this, the bastards.'

'Kay! You're above that kind of language!'

'Am I? I don't feel it. Not any more.' Collecting her handbag and suede jacket, she swept her long blonde hair back off her face. 'I'm a hardened criminal now,' she half joked.

'Well, if you ain't a sight for sore eyes,' Juanita chuckled as Kay sat down beside her on the bus. 'I expected a little more colour in your cheeks. You look as if you've been dragged through hell.'

'I have,' Kay quietly said. 'Trouble is, I'm still there trying to crawl out.'

Juanita sucked her teeth and slowly shook her head. 'What happened to you out there, eh?' The smile had gone from her face.

'Out there was great. I fell in love. It's back here

that's the problem.' Kay turned away, willing herself to be strong. She mustn't cry. She would walk into Thompson's with her head held high.

'Are you ready for it?' Kay gave Juanita a wry smile.

'No, but you had better get it off your chest.'

Kay started at the very beginning when she made the crucial mistake and altered the receipt book. She gave a methodical account of the whole drama almost as if she were recounting it to herself. Remembering, conveying, in a detached voice, what had gone on since they had last spoke.

Before either of them realized, the bus was pulling up at Kay's stop. Taking a piece of paper from her pocket, Juanita quickly wrote down her telephone number. 'Phone me this evening or earlier if you want to talk. I'm usually home by four-thirty.'

Slipping the piece of paper into her pocket, Kay thanked her friend and jumped down from the bus feeling much better than when she got on. Her stomach was still in a turmoil, threatening to throw everything out one minute and striking her with pain the next. But not her mind. Her mind was clear. Her conscience was clear. And her determination strong.

From the minute she stepped into the lift, the

atmosphere could have been cut with a knife. Alf the lift man gave her a sympathetic smile while two of the women from the canteen threw her a knowing look. Their expression said it all. They thought she was guilty.

'I suppose the whole bloody building knows about it?' Kay said, firing the question at Alf.

'It's been the talk of the town,' he smiled. 'And a lot of people are very angry. We know you're a cheeky cow at times but we don't think you're a thief. So keep your chin up and don't let anyone put you down. If they do, come and see me for a pep talk.' Alf spoke in a fatherly fashion, which touched Kay.

'Thanks Alf.' She gave him a wink and walked away, pushing the swing doors with more vengeance then she meant to. Her plan was to remain cool. Cool and clever. Listening out for any remarks that were derogatory, any looks of suspicion. She needed to know who her friends were before she could attack the enemy. And she would attack. Verbal abuse or otherwise. Her bottled-up anger was bursting to escape.

Making a grand entrance into the Accounts office, Kay stood her ground, smiling defiantly at her colleagues. There was a deathly hush as each one turned to her. First it was Doreen, doing her best

to smile. Then James, the junior clerk who, though she couldn't swear to it, seemed to be sneering.

'Morning, Kay,' Mr Grieves finally said. 'I'd like a word in private.' He looked embarrassed.

'No need for that. Anything you've got to say can be said in public. My washing is already on the line.' She smiled back at him. 'And before you ask, no. I didn't do it. I've been charged, but I'm innocent. OK?'

There was a look of surprise from both Doreen and Mr Grieves. Even James looked as if he might fall off his chair.

'The question is,' Kay spoke as if she were in court, the prosecutor rather than the accused. 'Where *is* the missing registered envelope with its fat contents?'

They stared at her in disbelief. How could she joke at a time like this? 'Would you like me to arrange some coffee?' Doreen looked sick with worry.

'No thanks, Doreen. I'll wait for the break. I've got too much to do.' Charged with a new-found courage, Kay stepped towards her desk, pulled out the top drawer and tipped the contents into the middle of the office floor. She did the same with every drawer and container on her desk until there was nothing left. The others sat rooted to the spot,

staring down at the heap of office sundries, paper, notebooks and files.

'It's all right, I'm not gonna put a match to anything. Not yet.' Falling to her knees she began to search through the tip.

'Kay, we've already looked. Mr Grieves and I went through everything. That's why we came in early.'

'After this, it's your desk, James. And then Doreen's, and then yours, Mr Grieves. We must leave no stone unturned!'

Fearing for her state of mind, Mr Grieves stepped forward and offered his hand. 'Come on, Kay. There's no need for that.'

'No? Well you try being dragged off to a police station the minute you walk back from your holiday and see how it feels! You try being arrested! Being questioned and charged for a crime you didn't commit. Then come and tell me that!'

The opening of the office door broke the tension. 'Ah, Mr Grieves, the Chairman would like a word with both you and Kay.' Miss Jamieson, the Managing Director's secretary, stared down at the floor, at Kay and at the mess.

'Ah, Miss Jamieson!' Kay made no move to get up, but leaned back on her hands and tossed her silky blonde hair. 'That's a very smart outfit

you're wearing today. Straight from Harrods, no doubt?'

Ignoring the remark, Rebecca Jamieson turned to Mr Grieves. 'We have Mr Drake with us now.'

Quick to her feet, Kay stood in front of the haughty woman. 'Have we really? How splendid. Excuse me.' She pushed her aside and stormed out of the room, making her way to the Chairman's chambers.

Drake and the Chairman, Mr Thompson, stared blankly at Kay as she burst into the office. 'Everyone, it seems, has decided to get in early today. I wonder why?'

Paying no attention to the pleas from Doreen and Mr Grieves who were on her heels, Kay moved towards Drake. 'You're a liar. And I think you might be a thief as well.'

'Now then, Kay . . .' Mr Grieves's voice went over her head.

'And d'yer know what happens to a liar and a thief where I come from? You know, the other side of the tracks, where only the lowest of the low live?'

'I should think an old lag would have no trouble finding refuge in those Dickensian backstreets,' Drake flashed a knowing smile at the Chairman, 'code of silence and camaraderie.'

'You gormless overgrown *maggot*!' Kay slowly

shook her head and found herself laughing at him. 'Dickensian? It's time you woke up, cretin.' Not wanting to spend any more time in his company, she stepped forward, grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and with strength borrowed from her anger, pushed him across the office, knocking an antique statue flying. '*We* get arrested! Even if we're innocent! Now get up! Get up and tell the truth, you spineless bastard!'

As Drake started to raise himself on to his elbows, Mr Grieves stepped forward, but Doreen grabbed his arm. 'Leave her,' she murmured. 'She knows more than we do.'

'You saw me alter that book and you know it!' Kay lunged towards Drake again, grabbing his tie and glaring into his eyes. 'Tell them the truth, you sodding coward! *Tell them*!'

'I have told them.' Curling his top lip, Drake pushed his face close to hers. 'You're no better than your scum family,' he sneered.

A flash of fury shot through Kay and before she could stop herself, she drew back her arm, clenched her fist and used all her power to land a punch square on his face. Overcome with anger and humiliation, Drake shot forward and grabbed Kay's hair, pulling until her head almost touched the floor. 'Apologize, you slut!'

'That's enough!' Grieves pushed Miss Jamieson out of his way. 'Let go of her, Drake, before I—'

'*Stephen*! Out here! Now!' The booming voice of Drake's father took them all by surprise. 'Move!'

Everyone's attention turned on the red-faced man standing in the doorway. 'I'll deal with this,' he said, assuming command. 'In *private*!'

The colour draining from his face, Stephen Drake pulled himself to his feet, pushed his shoulders back and tried to cover his fear. It was clear to everyone that his father reigned supreme. He instantly filled the room with his oppressive presence.

'And who are you, sir, to come barging into my office?' Mr Thompson was not the least pleased.

'Stephen's father,' he returned curtly, ending it.

'From the Met?' Kay smiled knowingly. 'Here to save your son's skin, no doubt.' She ignored the urgent look on Mr Grieves's face, warning her to take heed.

'I'll show the gentlemen into the boardroom,' Rebecca Jamieson smiled benignly as she led the way out of the Director's chambers. 'We hadn't realized you were dealing with this case—'

'I'm not!' he said definitively as he followed her out of the room.

Once Mr Thompson had ushered everyone except

Kay out of his office, he closed the door and sighed. 'It'll be much easier in the long run if you tell the truth, you know.'

With her back to him, Kay asked if she could have a glass of water. Filled with disappointment that he really believed she was guilty, the anger which had fuelled her actions earlier began to drain away and she made no effort to stop the tears.

'We shan't press charges, and *if* the police are prepared to drop the matter, we'll settle for your confession. Of course it will mean your finding employment elsewhere, and I can't promise to give you a clean reference.'

Taking the glass of water from him, Kay felt like giving in, saying that she had taken the money, and putting an end to the whole thing. It might be easier to confess than to fight. She could walk away from the building. Away from the accusing faces.

'Crime really doesn't pay, you know. I should have thought you would have learned that from your brother who spent time in prison.'

'I haven't got a brother,' she murmured.

'Oh, well, your uncle then.' He waved his hand impatiently.

Her uncle. So that had come out too. While she had been in Spain believing that her colleagues were struggling along without her, people had been

delving into her private family business, discussing her uncle. What right had they to do that? What right had they to accuse her of stealing when she had never once taken a penny that didn't belong to her? Who did these people think they were?

'Does your wife know you've been fornicating with your secretary?' She smiled into his shocked face. Fornicating. She liked that word. She remembered it from senior school. It had been the cause of a humorous debate between the teasing adolescent boys in her class and the naïve student teacher who thought they had been interested in her religious knowledge lesson.

'You could end up in court for that, you know,' Kay continued. 'If Jamieson's old man filed for a divorce you'd be—'

'That's enough!' His red angry face looked fit to burst. 'You insolent wench!'

'Not very nice, is it, Mr Thompson? To be accused of something you haven't done? How would you feel if your wife believed the lie and stopped trusting you?' By the expression on the Chairman's face, Kay had a feeling she might have touched a nerve.

A tapping on the door stopped her getting in too deep. She could hardly believe herself, speaking to the Chairman like that. She would have apologized

if Rebecca Jamieson's sickly smiling face had not appeared.

'Would you come to the boardroom please, Kay.' The polite request was delivered as if it were an order.

'No, I won't. I've had enough. You go and play detectives if it gives you a thrill. *I* am going home!'

'I don't think that would be wise.' Again the sickly smile.

'Oh, get out of here, both of you. I'm fed up to the back teeth with it.' Mr Thompson poured himself a whisky, keeping his back to them.

Kay pushed her way past Miss Jamieson and strode along the corridor towards the boardroom. Again she was filled with determination to prove her innocence, if only to put Jamieson in her place. Kay hadn't bargained for the scene that awaited her in the plush, oak-panelled room.

Stooping beside his thickset father, Stephen Drake was a different person. His cockiness had been replaced by a bent head and a twisted expression. 'I didn't mean to get you in trouble,' he said quietly.

'We can't tell *talk* from *mutter*!' His father barked into his ear, causing Drake to shudder. 'And *stand up straight*!'

As his ashen face lifted to Kay's, she was overwhelmed with pity, and felt like telling him not to

let himself be dictated to by his father, but the great bully of a man scared her too.

'I'm sorry for what I've put you through,' Drake inhaled slowly, doing his best to conduct himself with some self-respect. 'I'll set the record straight,' he said.

Kay's mind was racing. Why was she feeling guilty? Drake had deliberately lied, not giving a thought to the fact that she might have faced a prison sentence. Now he was offering to set the record straight, as if he were doing her a favour. As if *she* should be grateful. And the worst of it was, she did feel a sickening sense of gratitude. Looking from him to his father, Kay knew where to lay the blame: at the feet of this overbearing man who stood before her. The father, who was returning her scorn with a grimace, was at the root of the trouble. He was sending her a message. She was a loser.

'I always knew,' Rebecca Jamieson chimed in, startling Kay who had not heard her come in. 'Under the magnifying glass that M *was* clearly an M, not a seven. We felt sure you were innocent all along.'

'You lying cow! They told me at the station, *you* thought I did it. You *regretted* taking on someone from a housing estate. And this boy, as you called him, must be innocent, because he comes from a

good family. Because *his* father is a high-ranking officer in the Met!'

'Yes, well,' she smirked foolishly, 'you can hardly blame us for wondering.'

Without pausing for a second, Kay slapped the secretary's arrogant face and enjoyed the tingling it left in the palm of her hand. 'Now fuck off. All of you!'

As if suddenly struck dumb, the three of them stared at Kay as, turning her back on them, she let out a low whimper and hugged herself. Unable to cope with this display of emotion, they each scuttled faint-heartedly from the room, leaving her to it.

An excited buzz was spreading outside the board-room door, but Kay moved to the large window and stared out.

'He admitted it!' Doreen's voice rang through her brain. Why was everyone so overjoyed? Had they believed she'd done it? Didn't they realize that the truth would come out in the end? Now it was Marge from the switchboard who was shouting for joy. And Ivy the tea lady.

Turning from the window, she gazed at the frosted panelled glass wall, which separated the room from the corridor and Kay from her colleagues grouped together outside, enjoying the euphoria of a crisis

resolved. She felt as if she were acting in a film. A movie in which she was the star. Why were they reacting like this? Why weren't they angry? Or feeling like her, sad and let down? Why *did* she feel so hurt, so betrayed? It was a different pain inside now.

A large notepad and pen lying on the long, highly polished table caught Kay's eye. Sitting down on a padded chair, she picked up the biro and wrote in large letters THEY THOUGHT IT WAS ME. She looked up from the pad to the window, and feeling strangely drawn to it, she dragged herself from the chair.

Gazing down at the busy street, thoughts came flying at her. *Wouldn't it serve them right if I jumped? The crowd would soon gather round my broken body. Someone from Thompson's would hear the commotion and look out. Word would spread. I would be dead, and it would be their fault. No more having to face Drake or the police. No more threats of a prison sentence for forgery.*

Behind her, Kay heard the creaking of the heavy mahogany door as Mr Grieves pushed it open. 'Doreen said you'd be in here.'

Keeping her back to him, Kay kept her eyes on the street below. 'They thought I stole that money,' she repeated quietly.

'No, Kay.' He sounded choked. 'None of us believed it. That's why Doreen and I were in early. We searched the office from top to bottom.'

She could feel him moving towards her. 'Please don't come any closer.' Even to herself, Kay's voice sounded different, toneless.

'Doreen's fetching some sweet tea for you.'

'I don't want anything.' Kay opened the window and leaned out. The people below looked so small. The street noise was inviting.

'Why don't we sit down for a while?' Grieves was trying his best.

'Will you please tell Doreen I don't want any tea.' Kay spoke in a monotone. 'Would you please go.'

'No, Kay, I won't.' His voice was quiet but firm. 'You've been through a lot. I dare say you're still in a state of shock. I think we all are.'

'No. You don't know what it feels like. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. You'd want to be on your own.'

'Is that honestly what you want? A few minutes by yourself?'

She turned to him and smiled as she cried. 'Yeah. It's OK. I'm not gonna . . .' She looked at the open window. 'I'm not brave enough. If someone else came along and took the life from me, that would

be different.' She wiped her face with the back of her hand. 'Eternal sleep,' she grinned. 'I wouldn't say no.'

Ignoring Kay's request for solitude, Grieves moved closer and placed one arm around her shoulders. 'I wish you could feel as relieved as I do about that confession.'

Pleased that he hadn't left the room, Kay allowed her head to rest against his shoulder. 'Part of me feels good about it, but the rest of me?' She looked thoughtfully into his grey eyes, 'It's having to face everyone. They all know about it.'

'Oh, I'm sure they do. And you can bet that within the hour they'll also know about Drake's confession.' He smiled into her tear-stained face. 'It seems a shame to let them celebrate without you and, well, with your permission, I would like to demand that some of today is taken up with a meeting, in the canteen. I think the Chairman should make a public apology. On behalf of the firm, of course.'

'He wouldn't go for that.'

'Oh, I think he will. No choice really. I should think several of the staff have been toying with the idea of walking out. But if you were given a public apology . . .'

Kay screwed her face up and forced back tears.

'That would be—' she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, 'that would be—' as much as she tried, she couldn't finish the sentence.

'You'd like that?' Grieves smiled broadly.

She nodded, her lips squeezed shut.

'Good. I'll see to it now.' He turned to leave and then stopped. 'Do you want to be present?' Her half-smiling, pained face said it all, and a slow nod of approval filled him with righteous indignation.

'We'll set the records straight, don't you worry.'

'There *is* something else.' Kay chewed on the inside of her cheek and wondered whether to continue.

'I know about your other extra employment, Kay. Doreen told me in confidence. It won't go any further.'

Kay sighed with relief. She was pleased he knew. 'What if Mr Thompson finds out?' She wiped a tear from her neck.

'I'll deal with that if and when it comes up. I don't think you have anything to worry about.' He winked at her and left the room.

Trying not to look too worried, Laura leaned on the balcony wall pretending she was taking the air and enjoying the last of the late afternoon sun.

She stubbed out a cigarette-end in the earth of the flower-filled window-boxes as she saw Jack striding through the playground, on his way back from a dockers' meeting. His unmistakable lean body and broad shoulders filled her with warmth. She gave him a wave and wondered how he had managed to get through the day.

'Kay back yet?' Jack tried to sound casual.

'No. Should be along any minute.' She followed him into the kitchen. 'How'd the meeting go?'

'OK.' He looked sheepishly at her. 'I s'pose Kay would 'ave phoned if that firm was giving her a hard time?'

'Of course she would.' She turned her back on him and covered her face with her hands.

'I wish I could say something to make you feel better, Laura, but I can't. I've been worried sick all day. And wild. Bloody wild, I'll tell yer.'

Sitting down opposite him at the Formica table, Laura lit another cigarette. 'They won't put her away, surely?'

'Who knows what they'll do. I'll tell you what, though—' Jack stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of Kay passing by the kitchen window. 'Here she is! Try to think of something else to talk about, for Christ's sake.'

'Why? Don't you think she'll want to talk about it?'

'I don't know what to think any more, tell the truth,' Jack said, staring down at the floor. He expected Kay to look depressed and drained, and tried to fix a smile on his face.

'Guess what?' Kay beamed as she stood in the doorway of the kitchen. 'He's confessed! I've had a public apology *and* the police are not gonna press charges over the passport form!' She paused for a breather. 'Kept my passport though. Said I've got to wait until next year till I apply for another one. Let me off with a stiff warning.' She spread her hands and hunched her shoulders, mimicking Pamela's Jewish father, to Jack and Laura's amusement. 'You could say *something*?'

'This isn't one of your silly jokes, is it?'

'No,' Kay dropped on to a chair, 'it's over.' She clicked her fingers. 'Just like that.' Then, realizing that her hand was still painful from punching Drake, she hid her discomfort. She would relate that scene later. 'What's for tea?'

'Dad's gonna get a Chinese take-away. And what d'yer mean, he confessed? Who confessed?'

'It's a long story. Can't I tell you tomorrow?'

'You're not having us on, are you?' Jack's eyes narrowed and he cocked his head to one side.

'Nope.' She stood up and kissed him on the forehead. 'It's over. I will tell you all about it. But not yet, eh?' Her eyes filled with tears again, but she managed to compose herself. 'I've really had it.' Reaching out for Laura, she gave her a big hug. 'I'm sorry I caused all that trouble. You know, signing the passport form. It was stupid. Immature.'

'Kay! Who confessed?' Jack's face was taking on an angry, determined look.

'The bloke who took it!'

'Yeah fine, but *who* took it?'

'I don't want to talk about it. It's over and done with!'

Laura looked at her daughter curiously. She seemed different, older. Her mind flashed to the holiday in Spain. 'Did you meet anyone nice on the Costa Brava?'

'What made you ask that?' Kay sounded both defensive and pleased that she had been asked.

'Just wondered.'

'I did as it happened. His name's Chris. He lives out there. Got his own bakery.'

'How old is he?' Jack's voice took on a different tone.

'Twenty-two,' she said, knowing he was in fact twenty-four.

Jack slowly nodded. 'Just as well you left him behind then. He's too old for you.' He looked her straight in the eye and made it clear that he meant what he said. 'Now then, sit down and fill me in on what happened today.'

'Oh please, Dad! I've had enough. Can't I just go round Pamela's and forget about it? Just for tonight? Pamela's mum'll feed me. You know what they're like for food.'

'Well if you'd rather 'ave herrings than sweet and sour pork.' Jack teased.

'Jewish people don't eat herrings *all* the time . . .'

'They smell like they do.'

'That's *so* insulting!'

'Your dad's tormenting you, Kay. You should know him by now.' She tried not to smile back at Jack.

'Go on, get going and ask Pamela's mother if she's made one of her nice poppy-seed cakes this week.'

'Now what was it you always told me? *Those who ask, don't get* . . .'

'I didn't ask you to ask, did I?' he grinned.

'*And those who don't ask, don't want*. I'm sure it went something like that.' Now Kay sounded as if she were talking to herself as she picked up her handbag and made for the door.

'I always gave you a tanner when you asked for a threepenny bit, though!' Jack called after her.

'Well,' Laura sighed, 'that's that then! We've been worrying ourselves sick all day, and she's been in seventh heaven.'

'Yeah. Puts years on you, don't it?' Jack looked genuinely concerned about himself. 'Why has Kay made me feel old all of a sudden?'

'Bernard! Bernard! Put up the closed sign will you? Supper is ready!' Pamela's mother shook her head at Kay. 'That man is so slow . . . It's a very sad thing. He reaches forty and settles for being old.'

'Why must you shout, Lillian?' Pamela's father stood in the doorway between the shop and the living quarters.

'Why? Because you are stone-deaf.' She shrugged at the girls. 'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'But if I am stone-deaf, why shout? Why not chalk messages on the blackboard?' Bernard winked at Pamela and Kay who were managing to keep a straight face. 'You don't look very brown, Kay.'

'Kay was arrested over the weekend.' Pamela couldn't contain it any longer. A silence fell as her parents gazed impassively at Kay.

'I was charged as well. They let me out on bail.'

Lillian and Bernard slowly and simultaneously lowered themselves into their chairs. 'Go on,' Lillian said, while scooping and serving fried fish. 'What happened?'

Kay told them the entire story from beginning to end, and the way they had treated her like royalty at Thompson's that day. She carefully skipped the bit about forging her passport form. She told them everything that Laura and Jack had wanted to know. Somehow it just seemed easier with this family. She knew they wouldn't continually throw questions at her, or butt in. They were listeners. At least to visitors. Not to each other. Not often.

'So what happened to the registered envelope?' Bernard asked after a respectful pause. Everyone waited while Kay searched for an answer.

'I don't know.'

'Would you like to know?'

'I would. I really would.' She became thoughtful. 'I think I typed the name and address on it. I remember the name.'

'What time of the day was it?' Bernard asked, in his usual calm manner.

'The afternoon. Before tea-break.'

'And this list? It was in alphabetical order?'

Kay thought about it. 'Yeah.'

'And his name?'

'Mr Woods.'

Bernard smiled quietly at her and ate a little more fish.

'I did type it. Just before tea-break,' Kay said, as it all came flooding back. 'It was the last one! I typed his *just* before the bell went!' She placed her knife and fork down. 'Do you think someone came in and stole the registered envelope?'

Bernard chuckled. 'Who wants an empty soiled envelope?' He took some potato salad.

'Well, what else could have happened to it?'

'What do you do the minute, or second, before you leave your desk to go to the canteen?' He looked at her with his brown, sleepy eyes.

Kay thought about it. 'I push my typewriter to the back of the desk. Don't ask me why.'

'Why?' Bernard looked from one to the other, hoping to get a reaction to his humour.

'It's a habit.' Kay shrugged in true Jewish style. Something she slipped into when in their company.

Disappointed that all three of them had missed his joke, he pressed on. 'Is there a gap?' He motioned with his fork.

Kay's face suddenly lit up as she remembered. 'Yes, there is! I sometimes push my biscuit crumbs down there to get rid of 'em.'

'Well, there we have it. Tomorrow you ask your boss to look. Let him find it. Tell him Mr Simmonds helped you remember, eh?'

'I will!' Kay grinned, 'I'll definitely tell him.'

'Pamela, why aren't you eating?' Lillian gazed at her daughter's full plate.

'I'm not hungry.'

'So?'

'If she's not hungry, Lillian, why must she eat?' Ignoring the scornful look from his wife, Bernard turned to Kay.

'When did you last visit your grandpa?'

'I don't know. Just before our holiday, I think. Why?'

'I saw him yesterday. In Petticoat Lane. The old man looked lonely. We had a chat.'

'He hasn't been in the shop lately as a matter of fact,' Lillian said. 'He always has the same thing: four rollmops and some cream cheese. Maybe he's gone off soused herrings. I don't think he came in for three weeks now; yes, it must be three weeks. Pamela, if you're not going to eat that, stop messing with it.'

'He asked me about the Brady Street Club.'

The three of them waited for him to finish what he was saying but he just shrugged.

Irritated by her father's measured nature, Pamela

sighed loudly. 'Well don't just leave it in the air. What was he asking?'

He gazed at all three of them in disbelief, 'It's not obvious?' There was an impatient pause. 'He asked me if he could be involved in some way.' He turned to Lillian. 'I think he misses the youth club.'

'But my grandfather's nearly seventy!'

'Once you've been involved with young people you get hooked.'

'Why can't he spend some time at the Brady Club then?' Pamela folded her napkin and looked sideways at him.

'Because he's not Jewish.' There was a touch of regret in his voice. 'I don't make the rules, Pamela.'

Preoccupied with her grandfather, Kay's mind wandered from the conversation. When she really thought about it she realized that she hadn't been in to see him for nearly a month, and he lived so close by. Suddenly filled with guilt, she pictured him in his tiny cottage going through his daily routine, which was centred around feeding himself and keeping himself and the house clean. His daily visit to the local was probably more for company than anything else.

'I think I'll go now, see if he's all right. You coming, Pam?'

'Hang on a minute. I have to speak with my parents.'

Bernard peered at her. 'She's after something, Lillian – hide the chequebook.'

Pamela raised an eyebrow and gave him one of her famous glares.

'So talk.' Lillian looked concerned.

'I'll wait until you've finished eating.'

'It's dirty talk?' She almost dropped her fork. 'I said something was wrong with this girl.' She narrowed her eyes, 'Did you get a period yesterday?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' She threw her fork down. 'Yes, I *did*!'

Lillian breathed a small sigh of relief. 'For small mercies.'

'I want to move out. Get myself a studio flat.'

Another silence filled the room and Kay almost choked on her lemonade as she watched the changing expressions on Lillian's face.

'You don't need a flat. You've got the best room.' She spoke in a determined, no-nonsense tone. 'A four-foot bed, an easy chair. A lovely carpet. Curtains that meet.'

'I want my independence.'

'At seventeen?' Bernard found it amusing.

'My grandfather's got a spare room,' Kay said, matter-of-factly.

'Has he? Right! What're we waiting for, then?' Pamela kissed her bemused father on the forehead and tried to catch her mother's left cheek, but Lillian pulled away. 'It'll kill two birds with one stone. Company for the old man and independence for me.'

'I was only saying—' Kay shrugged at Pamela's parents.

'It's a strange joke?' Lillian asked, once they had left.

'It's no more than a fancy,' Bernard reached across and patted her hand, 'it will pass. Stop worrying.'

Linking arms, Kay and Pamela strolled along the Whitechapel Road enjoying the early-evening buzz. There were only a few stalls left, clearing away, but still the 'waste' had a feeling of market day about it. People were rushing to and fro chasing buses, and an ambulance was racing along the main road with its emergency light and bell piercing through the air, making its way to the London Hospital.

'Everyone looks so pale and scrawny,' Kay said, looking around at the passers-by.

'I know. We've got to get back there before next year, Kay. I'm dying inside.'

'And where's the money coming from? You're in debt to your parents as it is. Now you want to get

a flat. That'll cost you. Even if you did move in with my grandfather, you'd still have to pay him something for your board and lodging.'

'I don't want a flat. I only said that. Give them something serious to worry about so that when I do ask if I can go back to Spain this year . . . when I "give in" over wanting my independence . . .'

'You conniving *cow*!' Kay began to laugh, but stopped the instant she remembered that her passport had been taken away. 'I won't be able to go,' she said miserably.

'I know. I can't help it, Kay. I've got to go back. I can't stop thinking about Charles.'

'Well you know what? I think we should be celebrating.' Kay was desperate to change the subject away from what now seemed like paradise. 'I'm a free woman! Come on.' She marched her friend forward. 'We're going to see an old friend of mine. You'll love him.'

Strolling along Vallance Road, they checked the numbers looking for Terry Button's house, and were surprised when a dark blue Jaguar pulled up beside them.

'I thought that was you, babe. Who you looking for?'

Peering into the car, Kay recognized Bert's brothers, Frank and Freddie, in the front seats. 'My friend lives

along here somewhere. Terry Button. Don't suppose you know him?'

'Terry Button?' Frank turned to his passenger in the back seat. 'Ring any bells, Reg?'

'Yeah, as it 'appens.' A knowing smile spread across the tanned face as he looked up at Kay. 'You'll find him in the Sun. He's got a lovely voice.' He looked away and smiled. 'Terri with an i.'

'Why?' Pamela looked puzzled.

'No . . . an *i*,' Reggie joked.

'The lead singer?' Freddie said with a wry smile.

'Give the girls a lift. Save 'em walking.' Reggie's quiet, serious voice caught Kay's attention. She couldn't help thinking how good-looking he was, with thick black hair and eyebrows to match. There was something about him. A mysterious, almost menacing quality.

She opened the back door and slid along the seat up close to Reggie, making room for Pamela. 'I love the smell of leather in cars.'

'Goes well with that perfume you're wearing.' Reggie winked at Kay.

'Thanks. It's Coty, *L'aimant*.' Kay liked the look of him even more close up. His mohair suit and gold cuff-links were quite impressive. She found herself wishing he were a bit younger.

'Bit like a getaway car really,' said Pamela, mock

innocent. The remark was a real killer. It suddenly went very quiet.

'How was Spain then?' Frank asked, looking at her in his mirror. 'Your friend's got more colour than you 'ave.'

'Don't tell her that or she'll sulk. I'm Pame*lia* by the way.' This slight variation on her name was a new one to Kay.

Reggie leaned forward and offered her his hand. 'Reggie. All right?'

'I think you'd better call us Uncle as well, Pame*lia*.' Freddie managed to keep a straight face.

'No, that's all right. You're Kay's uncles, not mine.' She could slip so easily into her sophisticated act.

'Spain was great!' Kay said. 'A bit too hot at times.'

'It was only ninety degrees.' Pamela combed her fingers through her long dark hair.

The men found that mildly amusing but kept it to themselves as they cruised along Roman Road. 'How long 'ave you known Terri?' Reggie asked Kay.

'Oh, years. We used to go down hoppin' on the same farm. Haven't seen him since the last time we went. I don't s'pose he's changed much.' She tried to imagine him two years older.

'I wouldn't bank on it,' Reggie said quietly, with a touch of concern in his voice.

'We were very close,' she looked into Reggie's deep brown eyes. 'We shared secrets.'

Reggie gave her a knowing smile, showing his admiration for her tact. 'The boys are gonna drop me off just along here, girls, so I shan't be having the pleasure of your lovely company.' He checked the time on his Rolex watch. 'It's a pity those two are your uncles.'

'As I said before,' Pamela cut in, leaning forward and smiling at him, 'they're not mine.'

'And that you're both so young,' he continued. 'This'll do, Frank.'

Screeching to a halt, Frankie put the car into neutral. 'See you later, Reg.'

'You're not coming to the Sun then?' Kay smiled, making it sound like an invitation. She knew her uncles would be disturbed by it but she couldn't help herself. She could feel herself drawn in by Reggie's presence.

'Bit of business to attend to.' Reggie gave the boys a show of his hand and Kay a flirtatious wink. 'If you're still footloose in five years, I'll take you to the best restaurant in town! That's a promise.'

'Why five years?' she called out of the window.

'You'll be five years older!'

Dropping back in the comfortable seat, Kay grinned at Pamela, who was sulking. 'Reggie, eh? Talk about chemistry.' She ignored the mocking laughter from her uncles. 'A thousand invisible silver darts flashed between us . . .' she recited melodramatically, trying to make light of the sudden crush she had on a total stranger.

Frank and Freddie found it amusing. 'Don't mention his name to your dad, babe, will yer.'

'Why?' Pamela quite fancied him too. 'He was really polite.'

'Don't they get on then?' Kay should have known her uncles wouldn't give much away.

'You could say that,' Freddie chuckled.

Walking into the pub, Kay felt as if she had entered another world. Terry was on the stage, belting out 'Kiss Me Honey Honey Kiss Me' and singing it beautifully. Even though he wore a long black evening dress and had dyed his hair auburn, still she recognized him. When her uncle Frank asked what she wanted to drink, she heard herself ask for a sweet Martini as if someone else were voicing her request.

She heard her uncles talking across her. 'I don't think she did know his deepest secret.' Frank was laughing.

'You'd better make hers a double,' Freddie added.

Settling herself into a chair, Kay fixed her eyes on her friend. He had changed, that was clear. Not his face – his figure. Or was it all padding? He looked taller, slimmer.

'What's wrong with you? Have you seen a ghost, or what?' Pamela looked from Kay to Terry. 'Surely you've seen a drag queen before?'

'Don't call him that.'

'Why not? What's wrong with drag queen?'

'His name is Terry, OK?'

Terry finished the number and gracefully drank in the applause, and then announced the arrival of a long-lost friend. Signalling to the stage-hand, he indicated to him to throw the spotlight on Kay. Before she could object, she was floodlit.

'My best friend of many years: Miss Kay Armstrong!' Terry proclaimed joyfully.

Deeply embarrassed, Kay could feel herself blushing. 'I'll kill you for this,' she mouthed to Terry as he approached, arms outstretched.

Hanging on to each other, gripping tight, they seemed locked together, Kay almost overpowered by his French perfume. People's eyes were on them, but neither cared.

'Kay . . .' Terry's voice, now quiet, was heavy with remorse. 'Stay with me. Don't go. Please don't walk out.'

Kay gently pulled back and looked into his brimming eyes. 'Why would I do that, you silly cow?' she grinned.

Laughing, he posed for her: 'What d'yer think then? Better than my old jeans and wellies, or what?' His eyes held secret doubt.

'Terry. Shut up.' Kay hugged him again, whispering into his ear. 'It's what's inside that counts.'

Terry let out a sigh and slowly shook his head. 'I dreaded you walking in 'ere one day. Seeing me.'

'What d'yer want to drink, Terri?' Frank called from the bar.

'No, it's all right, thanks!'

'Go on, have one, Tel. He's my uncle.'

Terry turned towards the bar. 'He's your *uncle*?' He looked impressed. 'OK, thanks, I will! G and T please, love!'

'He's not . . .' Kay suddenly felt embarrassed, 'you know. He's married.' She felt herself go hot around the neck.

'Leave off, Kay. I'm not after everything in pants you know. It's me, Terry. And I've got a friend, OK? I'm no different to you when it comes to relationships.' He wiped the lipstick from the corner of his mouth. 'I'm not a tart, and I only dress like this when I'm performing.'

Kay widened her eyes questioningly.

'Performing on the stage!'

Kay's lips parted in surprise.

'*Singing*!' he laughed. 'Mind you, I have been asked to do a bit of striptease. Not 'ere. In a night-club.'

'And?' Kay hoped for the right answer.

'Would you?' The humour stopped there.

'No I wouldn't.'

'And neither would I!'

'Our drinks are up, come on. Come and meet my other best friend.'

Seated round a corner table, Kay, Pamela, Terry and the two uncles got on famously. They talked about everything from hop-picking to the future of the London docks to unions and management. 'Don't talk to *me* about management,' Kay said after her second Martini. 'I'm up to here with it.'

'Listen,' Terry suddenly said, 'I'd love to sit and listen to your opinion on the subject, Kay, but I must get changed before Ray comes in. He 'ates seeing me in drag.'

'Ray? *The* Ray?' She was referring to an old friend of Terry's who threatened to punch him when he learned that Terry wasn't attracted to girls.

'Yeah,' Terry shrugged. 'I know. It was 'is way of not accepting what he was feeling. I should 'ave

known really. He was always going on about how this one or that one was . . . you know. Once he saw it wasn't the end of the world for me . . .' he shrugged.

Kay remembered the naked midnight dip in the Medway. Ray had been mouthing off about fancying her. It obviously hadn't been her fierce warnings which had kept him at bay. Suddenly his behaviour, which used to exasperate her, made sense. Ray had been trying to disprove something.

'Shame,' Kay murmured, 'we might have got on a lot better if he'd admitted it.'

Leaving them to it, Terry swanned off to a back room to change. Watching him, Kay couldn't help thinking how he looked every bit a woman.

'Anyway, where was I?' Kay asked.

'Management, babe, and why you're celebrating tonight.' Her curly-headed uncle chuckled.

Once again she related the story, pleased to offload it and flattered that her uncles showed interest. She knew Pamela was bored, wishing they could be with younger company, but that was tough. Kay had been through a lot and thought she deserved some attention.

'So what d'yer wanna do about it?' Freddie spoke in a matter-of-fact tone but there was a suggestion of revenge in his voice.

'Nothing. Forget it, I suppose.' She shrugged and sipped her drink.

'It wasn't Friday the thirteenth was it?' Frank grinned.

'It was a Friday, yeah. But not the thirteenth.'

And that was enough. From her brief résumé, the brothers had worked out that the cash for the wages was collected from the local bank fortnightly and on a Friday.

'You're right, Kay babe. It's best to forget about it,' Freddie said, looking at his watch. 'Time we made a move, Frank.'

'You girls be all right walking back by yourselves? Or d'yer wanna lift?'

'We know these backstreets like the backs of our hands,' Kay said reassuringly, 'and besides, I want to see Terry before I go.'

'Mind how you *do* go,' Frank tousled Kay's hair. 'Goodbye, Pam*elia*. I expect we'll see you again,' he teased. 'That's if you can bear to stay in this cold, grey country.'

'Say hallo to your mum and dad for us, and your aunt Liz. Tell her we'll be round to see 'er soon.' Freddie winked at Kay and followed his brother out of the pub.

'You've got some dubious relations, Kay,' Pamela frowned. 'They look like criminals to me.'

'Silly cow. They're in import-export. I think they've got their own firm, or they've got top positions in one, according to my dad. I remember him and uncle Bert arguing about them once. They're not short of cash,' she added proudly.

'Anyone can see that. You should have asked them to lend you the money for Spain.'

'Kay, this is Ray. Ray, this silly cow is Kay from hop-picking – looking a lot more grown-up and sophisticated . . . and this is her friend Pamela.' Terry looked just like his old self in his jeans and white T-shirt, with most of his make-up wiped off.

'Hallo, Ray,' Kay reached out and shook his hand.

'Well. Where shall we go then?' Ray looked pleased to be in their company.

'You name it,' Pamela said, admiring Ray's good looks, feeling sorry that he preferred boys to girls.

'We can't afford the Kentucky but there's other little nightclubs. We could club-crawl.' Terry grinned.

'Kentucky Club,' Kay said thoughtfully. 'Where 'ave I heard that before?'

'From your uncles. That's where they'll be heading.'

'I said they were criminals. Only villains, film stars and politicians go to the Kentucky,' Pamela said in her high-handed way.

Making their way out of the Sun, Kay stopped in her tracks. 'Hang about you lot, we're broke. I've only got three pounds to last me the rest of the week.'

'The night's on us.' Terry turned to Ray, 'I haven't seen her for over two years.'

'Yeah, all right,' Ray nodded. 'But don't start asking for doubles.'

Chapter Ten

It was four weeks since the missing salary episode, and everyone at Thompson's appeared to have forgotten all about it. Everyone except Kay. Sitting at her desk, pulling and stretching a paper-clip until it became a single wire, she wondered what she would say when she handed in her notice. She shaped the wire into a spiral, pushed the two ends together and created a ring to slip on her finger. Her mind filled with Chris. She couldn't imagine getting through the year without seeing him.

Pushing herself around in her swivel chair, she turned her face towards the sun streaming in through the window, and tried to visualize herself on a white sandy beach, lying next to Chris's tanned body, holding his hand, waiting for him to turn over on to his stomach the way he did, and kiss her.

'I'm ready to sign today's letters, Kay.' Mr Grieves's voice drifted across the partition.

She could feel Chris's strong hand easing its way under the small of her back, and his muscular arm turning and lifting her on to his sweat-beaded chest.

'I've got one more memo to dictate, but that needn't be typed until tomorrow.'

He was kissing her neck now and pushing the palm of his hand across her sun-warmed stomach . . .

'Kay!' Grieves's face appeared above the glass partition. Kay looked from the grey-suited bulky body, distorted by frosted glass, up to his bespectacled face. 'My letters?'

'Mr Grieves . . .' Kay had left the beach but she wasn't quite back in the present. Somewhere in between. She gazed into his puzzled face. 'I'm leaving,' she said flatly. 'Who should I hand my notice to?'

A bemused smile crossing his face, Grieves raised an eyebrow. 'Why do you want to leave, Kay?'

She picked up the black folder containing the letters for signing and walked around to his side of the partition. 'Because I hate it here now.'

'You don't mean that.' Grieves leaned back in his chair and clicked the end of his biro several times.

'Do I have to give a week's notice, or is it a month?'

'If you are serious, I think we should have a private word.' He threw his pen down on the table, conveying his impatience.

'No, sorry. I'm not interested in company policy to persuade staff to stay on. I've made up my mind.' She offered him the black folder. 'We're all mad to work 'ere.'

'What's brought this on?' He opened the folder and began signing the letters with a flurry of speed.

Kay folded her arms and looked up thoughtfully at the ceiling. 'Well I suppose it could have started to dawn on me when I was accused of stealing that there might be better places to work.'

'Yes, I thought that might be at the bottom of this.' He sounded pleased, as if it were something he could talk to her about, make her see sense.

'I've been window-shopping, down the Brook Street Bureau. I can earn more money, get better conditions, good prospects.'

Grieves nudged his bifocals down his nose and looked up at her. 'You really mean to do it?'

'You make it sound like suicide.'

He pushed himself around in his chair and looked out at the modern office block opposite. 'It feels a bit like that. I wonder why?'

Taken aback by his tone, as if he were speaking to an equal instead of a junior, Kay felt warmness towards him. 'To leave here and go out there, you mean?'

He turned to her and gave a hint of a nod. 'Something like that.'

That line proved too near the mark. Grieves turned his attention again to his signing.

Kay couldn't be sure but she thought he sounded a bit choked. 'Would one week's notice be OK?'

Clearing his throat, Grieves said he would check with Rebecca Jamieson and let Kay know tomorrow, after she'd had a night to think it over.

'You don't want to rush into this,' he sighed, as if he were saying something he didn't really believe. 'We'll have another word in the morning.'

Kay nodded slowly and smiled. He was a funny man. Strict one minute and soft as anything the next. Yes, she would miss him too.

A slight feeling of doubt began nagging at Kay as she prepared for the next day. Friday. Pay-day. She looked up at the registered envelope that had been retrieved from behind the desk and was now stuck on the wall for everyone to see.

The small, dusty blue van had been parked in Clerkenwell Road for an hour by the time Kay strolled by the next morning on her way to work.

She was thinking about the way she might play games with Jamieson when she smiled patronizingly at her, saying that Kay would be hard-pressed to find another company as friendly as Thompson's. She had heard about the rehearsed company speech from one of her friends when she tried to leave. A rise of one pound a week and empty praise were all it had taken to persuade her to stay.

'I'm a bit pushed this morning, Kay,' Grieves said as she stood before him. 'I'll have a word with Management after lunch.'

'Fine.' Kay was in no hurry. Her mind was made up. As she turned away, he asked her not to let it distract her from her work.

'Don't worry. It won't happen twice.' She didn't try to keep the bitterness out of her voice as she walked away and out of the office.

And that's exactly why I'm leaving! She pushed open the door to the ladies' room and pulled a packet of five Weights from her cardigan pocket. *Bloody cheek.* It wasn't her fault. Anyone could have made that mistake. She lit a cigarette and stared out of the window at the street below. The dark blue van was still parked in the street, but meant nothing to her. *There he goes. James, upright in his three-piece suit, on his way to collect the wages.* Suddenly, without warning, Kay found herself crying, in anger, not

self-pity. She paced the floor. 'It's not fair,' she told the room. 'It shouldn't have happened! I hate them. I hate this place. I hope it burns down!' Dropping on to a chair, she stubbed out her cigarette with the heel of her shoe, not caring about the mess it made on the cold tiled floor.

'Mr Grieves is asking for you, Kay,' Doreen stood with her back against the door, keeping it open. 'We've all got a lot to do today.'

'I know. I wish I had the same enthusiasm I used to have. I can't help it, Doreen. That office. This building. It closes in on me. Sometimes I feel as if I'm suffocating.'

Laughing and shaking her head, Doreen waved her towards the door. 'I think you've missed your cue in life, Kay. You should have been an actress.'

'There's still time,' Kay forced a smile, 'I'm not exactly old.'

'Come on, be a good girl. You always said Friday was your best day. Think of the party tomorrow night. That should put some life into you.'

Walking back along the corridor to their office, Kay told Doreen that she was going to hand in her notice. She was a bit disappointed when the only reaction was slight annoyance that she would have to train someone all over again.

'I wish I had known a year ago you had no

intention of staying,' Doreen said as she sat down at her own desk. 'There were two others after that position.' She began typing. 'Now they're established in Bought Ledger and Cost Office.'

Kay felt a flush of anger when Doreen mentioned Bought Ledger. 'That's where Drake worked, till he was transferred to one of the subsidiary companies, after that embarrassing little episode! It would have been a different story if I'd been the guilty one. But then, *I'm* only a docker's daughter!'

She pulled the cover off her typewriter and shoved it in the small cupboard next to her. 'I suppose they've given Drake promotion at the same time for his troubles brought on by the silly mistake of a fellow employee!'

'If you could pop round, Kay? I would like to dictate a couple of memos.' Grieves was obviously in a mood and didn't want to hear her grievances. There was no smile in his voice today.

Collecting her notepad, Kay accidentally knocked against James's chair which fell forward, knocking his filing tray on to the floor.

'Leave it, Kay!' The impatient voice warned her to do as she was told and not argue.

'I'm sorry,' she said, leaning on the partition, looking down at Mr Grieves. 'I couldn't help it.'

Scratching his neck, he frowned. 'I realize that. We'll get on then, shall we?'

Kay felt an overwhelming desire to run out of the office, away from the building. It was stifling her again. She looked out of the window, trying to remind herself that fresh air and sunshine were still out there and always would be, even though the sun didn't shine as much here as it did in Spain.

Glancing down she saw something which caused her to freeze to the spot and then break into a sweat as she saw two men with stockings pulled over their heads jump out of the dark blue van. One of them had a cosh.

'Mr Grieves! *Quick!* They're going for James!'

Grieves was at the window in a flash. The men weren't using the cosh, just threatening James who was handing over the holdall containing the money for the salaries which had just been drawn from the bank.

Kay felt as if she were watching a film that was over in seconds. The robbers were back in the van and roaring along Clerkenwell Road before any passers-by had a chance to realize what was going on. As she stood between Doreen and Mr Grieves, it seemed as if all three of them had suddenly turned to stone.

Snatches of conversation flashed across Kay's

mind as she remembered the evening in the pub with her uncles. *So what d'yer wanna do about it, Kay . . . You've got some dubious relations, Kay. They look like criminals to me . . . Only villains, film stars and politicians go to the Kentucky . . . Wasn't Friday the thirteenth, was it? No. But it was a Friday. We get paid fortnightly.*

Kay remembered the look that had passed between the two men. It had crossed her mind that they had been talking to her with something else on their minds. But never, not in a thousand years, had she thought that they were already planning to square the accounts. It all suddenly fell into place. Some of the things her dad had said about her uncles and the way they had always seemed to have money to throw around. They *were* villains. They really were.

Leaning against the window-sill, Kay left everyone else to the drama, finding it difficult to stop herself smiling. Would they dare to interrogate her again? Would they dare to accuse her of being an insider? She looked out of the window again at the crowd who had gathered around James. The hero. It would probably add colour to his grey image. No, they would never dream that it was her people who had performed that swift, professional snatch. And if they did? Kay was no longer smiling but quietly laughing. If they did have any reason to suspect her,

she felt confident Frank and Freddie would have left no trace of a clue.

When Kay officially handed in her notice that day, she thought Rebecca Jamieson might have detected the smugness in her voice. She had given her a long, puzzled look, but had said nothing.

Chapter Eleven

Wearing her favourite light blue button-through shift dress and matching sling-back shoes, Kay made her way along Lombard Street on a sweltering June afternoon. Weaving her way between pedestrians she arrived at the address on the slip of paper given to her by the employment bureau, and felt her heart sink. She peered in through one of the windows and saw that the ugly Victorian building was even worse inside.

Telling herself she had nothing to lose, Kay entered the dim reception area and made her way towards a long dark desk, deciding that she would go through with the interview now that she was here, but would not accept the position for which she was applying. This was another world. An alien world, where the staff walked around like sad robots with half-smiles fixed on their pale faces. It was as if all colour had been left at

the door. Black, white and grey surrounded her. Not the starkly contrasting black and white décor that Kay loved, but a heavy, old-fashioned drab interior.

'Mr Trillington will be down shortly.' The middle-aged woman spoke without looking up. 'If you would like to take a seat.' She swept a long red fingernail across the nape of her thin neck, capturing a few loose strands and slipping them under a tight French pleat of silver-grey hair.

'What's it like working here?' Kay wasn't really interested, she just wanted to see what was under the layers that seemed to prevent this woman from communicating.

Glancing briefly at Kay, she wound a sheet of paper into her grey typewriter. 'I shouldn't worry too much about that.' There was enough smugness in her voice to last a working lifetime.

'I wasn't.' Kay carefully leaned forward and lifted a hair from the grey padded shoulder. 'It's just that you don't seem full of the joys of spring.'

'Really?' Shooting her a ferocious look, the woman answered the internal telephone system.

'This carpet needs fumigating.' Kay slowly shook her head. 'It smells of stale cigarette smoke and yet still the moths lay their eggs.' She leaned on the edge of the archaic desktop and looked into the woman's

face. 'Doesn't it bother anyone? This building smells like an old metal ashtray.'

'Mr Trillington will see you now. Third floor, second door on the left.'

'Thank you.' Kay stood for a moment, wondering whether to bother. 'This is only the second interview I've ever been to. I really wasn't asking you for much. Just a few words. Anything that just might have made me feel a bit more at ease.' Kay was surprised at her own audacity.

Studiously examining her notebook, the receptionist looked as if she might be a touch embarrassed. 'Knock before you enter.'

During the lightning tour of the offices, seen through windows from the long dark corridor, Kay did her best to be polite and hide her boredom.

'Why do all the girls and women wear black and white? Is it a rule?' she asked, as they stood outside the typing pool, staring in.

'It's not exactly compulsory.' Trillington nervously scratched his nose and smiled down at her. 'We're a very conservative firm and a very busy one. It wouldn't do to have valuable time wasted.' He folded his arms and curled his bottom lip over. 'I'm talking about the male members of staff, of course. Can't expect them not to be interested in women. Bit of an old dog myself. I'm afraid your sort of colours

wouldn't do at all. They'd spend most of their time ogling. Then of course there's your hair.'

Kay checked her reflection in a darker part of the window. Her new short-bob turned perfectly under her chin and the thick fringe was dead straight and sat level with her eyebrows. So what was wrong?

'I'm afraid you simply wouldn't fit in. But you seem a bright girl; I expect you've worked that out for yourself. Nothing to do with you, of course. Just your appearance. The blonde "sex kitten",' he smiled. 'The directors would throw a fit if I took you on.'

Sex kitten? He couldn't, as far as Kay was concerned, have insulted her more. She hated the label blondes were given, especially if, like her, they happened to be five foot eight. 'My hair's natural.' She found herself making excuses and feeling ashamed. 'And I'm too thin to be classed as a sex kitten.' She could feel the blood rushing to her face again and hated herself for being embarrassed when she should be giving this pompous git a piece of her mind.

'Those girls,' she could hear the tremor in her voice and cleared her throat, 'they may be wearing traditional black and white but they look like tarts. Their skirts are too tight and too short and the fact that they wear their blouse collars up makes them

look as if they're Teddy girls. And they're wearing too much make-up.'

Trillington placed one arm around her waist and steered her away from the window back along the corridor towards his office. 'Come and take the weight off your feet. I'll explain about personal appearance. The difference between what you might wear when you go out with a boyfriend and what you ought to wear when—'

'No thanks.' Kay pulled away from his clammy hand. 'I think I can work that out for myself.'

Looking at his watch, he raised an eyebrow. 'Almost noon. I think I could get away with an early lunch.' He winked at Kay. 'A drink and a quick sandwich sound OK?'

She could hardly believe her ears. A man who must be old enough to be her father and from a different class was asking her out to lunch?

'Unless you want to come back after business hours.' He lifted her chin with his forefinger so she had to look into his leering eyes.

Pushing his hand away she shot him a look of disgust and turned away, her low stiletto heels thudding on the dust-filled carpet. And as she walked quickly down the stairs she willed herself not to break down. 'I won't cry,' she said aloud, 'I won't.'

For most of her life Kay had been told she was too

sensitive, bursting into tears at the least thing. But not this time. And, she was determined, not ever again. At least she had Thompson's to thank for that. She had made a resolution when she walked out of the building for the last time that she would never cry again, unless someone she loved were to die. She would allow herself tears then, but not for anything or anyone else would she ever weaken. Her crying days were over.

Sitting outside a small Italian café Kay enjoyed the sun on her face while she waited to be served. She was reminded of Spain and began to fantasize about her future, living with Chris in that small fishing village. For five weeks, since returning to England to face the music, she had quietly begged God to let there be a letter from Chris when she returned from work. So far there had been nothing. Not a word. She had written and posted the first letter.

Maybe they were all the same? Out of sight, out of mind. She had given up on Zacchi a long time ago.

She sipped her coffee and wondered if it was time yet to make a secret appointment with Doctor Brynberg. She was now three weeks late and seriously worried. Would her family ever believe that she had gone out there a virgin and had only made love with Chris twice?

Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, Kay pushed

open the glass swing doors leading into the reception of Waterman's Publishing. Her second interview that day. The first had managed to crush her self-esteem and she wondered how she would react if she were put down a second time.

This time she decided to try harder with her accent. She recalled her teacher drilling into her and the other girls on the commerce course that a 't' was on the end of a word for a reason, and that they must sound it. She had been just as pedantic too about not dropping aitches.

'My name is Kay Armstrong.' She assumed the voice she used when working on the switchboard at Thompson's. 'I have an appointment at two o'clock.' She quickly checked the piece of paper for the personnel officer's name.

'Oh right, yeah,' the young girl checked her diary. 'Mrs Jarold's expecting yer. She's gonna be tied up for ten minutes though. D'yer wanna cuppa coffee while yer wait?' Pushing back her chair the curly-headed receptionist stood up. 'It tastes like camel's piss smells, but if you eat a square of chocolate with it,' she shrugged and grimaced.

'It's OK,' Kay laughed, 'I've just had a cappuccino. Is it all right if I have a cigarette while I'm waiting?' She had dropped her telephonist's voice and

compromised, not slipping back completely into her everyday East End tones.

'Not s'posed to smoke in Reception, but I'll keep my eye out for Mr Branson. He's 'ead of staff. Struts about like a peacock with a slipped disc. We've got a smoking room but it's on the second floor.'

'I'll wait till later. Thanks anyway.'

'No. Go on. It's bloody nerve-rackin' goin' for interviews. You wanna fag – have one!'

'No, honestly, I'm not a proper smoker. Just like one now and again.' She sat down on the edge of the red and white sofa and placed her handbag on the glass-topped table. 'What's it like working here?'

'Fucking brilliant, I tell yer. Some of the journalists.' She rolled her eyes and puckered her full pink lips. 'Keep arm's length with the married ones though. They'd 'ave you in the corridor if they could.' She picked up her emery board and filed a broken fingernail.

'I'm being transferred to the subscriptions department. They need a fast typist, or so they said.' She leaned forward and lowered her voice. 'I think Mr Branson told Mrs Jarold that I'm a bit too common for Reception. Fucking cheek. I got caught right out last week though. Couldn't be bothered to go into the cloakroom to do me hair, so I used that big pink mirror.

'There I was, backcombing away like mad, trying to straighten this lot. Me hair was sticking out all over the place and in walks two really important clients. And guess who was with 'em?'

'Mr Branson?'

'Bang on. I tell yer, it was really embarrassing. For the men I mean. Didn't know where to put their faces.' She unscrewed the lid of her nail varnish and carefully painted over the repaired nail. 'It didn't bovver me. I 'ad me make-up on so I knew me face was all right when I took their coats. Cashmere they was. Think they were quite important as it 'appens. Still, there you go. I'd rather be in Subs anyway. The blokes are a right laugh and I quite fancy the driver, Roger. You wait till you see 'im.'

The interview went well. Kay liked Mrs Jarold and from what she could tell the feeling was mutual, and she passed her typing test with flying colours. She was then offered the position either of Receptionist or Production Assistant on the fortnightly magazine *Stock Market*, where she would be working closely with the journalists. Her role would be to ensure that copy was properly typed up and in on time. She opted for Receptionist but asked if she could type copy as well. The one thing Kay hated most was to be bored.

As she stepped on to the train at Moorgate underground a sudden wave of pleasure flowed through

her. Her salary had shot up overnight from seven pounds ten shillings to twelve pounds ten a week, and she would get luncheon vouchers on top. But more importantly, she had been treated with respect at the interview.

The train pulled away; just one stop to go, Bethnal Green. Kay felt as if she had been given another start in life; a career she felt sure would hold excellent prospects. Working for a publisher alongside writers was a dream she hadn't imagined could ever happen. Catching sight of her reflection in the train window she decided that her new hairstyle was a success. She liked it, now that she was getting used to it. It had been rather a shock when the scissors were first taken to her long hair.

Suddenly aware of her silly smile, she felt embarrassed at admiring her reflection. She cast her eyes along the car to check if anyone had been watching and noticed the smartly dressed drunk who was hanging on to a rail for dear life. She wondered where in the world he came from. Not the East End, that was for sure. But then, had it not been for his three-piece suit and silver-topped walking stick, the thought would not have crossed her mind.

'Clothes maketh the man' was something her art teacher always used to say. If clothes made this man, then alcohol had certainly done the opposite. His

red face and glassy eyes reminded her of the meths drinkers who sometimes lay in the gutter, blood seeping from bandaged heads, outside the Salvation Army hostel in Whitechapel.

Instead of going home after her interview Kay found herself unlatching the gate leading into Delamar Place. Since Pamela's parents had pointed out, and probably deliberately, that her grandfather was a lonely old man, she had made a point of seeing more of him and had gained much by it. Laura had always said he was a rough diamond, and up until recently Kay had not really understood what her mother meant. Now she knew. She had got to know Billy more during the past couple of weeks than in all her seventeen years.

'I'm pleased about your job, Kay,' Billy said, handing his granddaughter a cup of tea, 'but I can't say it eases my mind.'

'Tell me what's *on* your mind and perhaps I can ease it for yer.' She dipped a chocolate Bourbon into her tea.

'I think you know.' He sank into his cushioned armchair and waited.

'Know what?' Kay could feel her heart begin to beat faster. Surely he hadn't picked up on her worst fears?

Billy said nothing; he was wise enough to know

that a short silence could say more than a stream of words. He sipped his tea and stared down at the floor.

'You tell me what you think it is and I'll tell you if you're hot, warm or cold. A new version of I Spy.'

Still he said nothing, pretending to be interested in a worn patch on the arm of his chair.

'You're not clever, Billy. I can see right through you.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Yes.' She leaned back in her chair and kicked her shoes off. 'I'm quite happy to sit and enjoy this silence.'

'Good.'

Listening to the loud tick of the large wooden clock on Billy's shelf, Kay began to count the seconds to see how long he could sit it out. She knew he loved to chat, and it hadn't slipped her notice that he had brought out his oldest photograph album. The one he had promised to show her when he found it. The one that was full of pictures of his daughter, Laura, who, apart from her dark hair, looked so much like Kay.

She counted two hundred and fifty seconds and was beginning to get cross with him for the casual way he sat there, unperturbed.

'OK, so I'm worried about something, am I?'

she said finally. 'So what? Everyone has something to beef about.' She was slipping into his language again.

Billy swallowed the remains of his tea, carefully placed the bone-china cup on the saucer, sat back again and folded his arms. This time he looked tenderly into her face and shook his head. His expression said it all. He knew she had been a silly girl.

'You haven't said anything to Mum, 'ave yer?' she murmured, ashamed.

Pursing his lips, Billy shook his head defiantly. 'That's something you're gonna have to do, Kay, and soon.' He raised his eyebrows. 'I suppose it did happen in that bloody foreign country?' There was hope in his voice that he might be wrong.

Kay nodded and covered her face with her hands. 'He *was* English though – well, practically – and he *was* the first.'

'You don't have to tell me that, Kay. I saw the difference in your face when you got back. I can't tell you what the look is, but I saw it in your mother's face when your dad had first carried her through the bluebells.'

'Dad'll go mad.' Kay's mind was suddenly filled with Jack; the way he still treated her like his baby girl.

'Your dad knows already. Well, not about . . .' he nodded towards her stomach. 'He's kept the letters back. Didn't read any of 'em. But he's not daft. He knows they're love letters.'

'He did *what*?' Kay could hardly believe her ears. 'Are you telling me that Chris has written to me?'

'Don't be too hard on him, Kay. He was hoping it would blow over and you'd forget him if you thought he'd forgotten you.'

'That's horrible! How could he do that to me?' She was about to cry and remembered her resolve not to. Taking a deep breath she stood up, keeping her back to Billy. 'He'll think I don't care. He'll think I was just using him.'

A loud banging on the door stopped her dead. They both knew it would be Laura come to check up on him on her way home from Hammond's.

'Don't say anything. Not a word.' Kay stormed out of the room.

Opening the door to her mother, Kay forced herself to smile. 'I got the second interview I went for!'

'What did you do wrong on the first one?' Laura teased, and opened her arms to Kay who sprang into them.

'I've just had a phone call from your dad.' Laura walked arm in arm with Kay along the passage. 'You've got a visitor.'

'Where's today's paper, then?' Billy asked as Laura bent down to kiss his head. 'And where's Liz got to? This is the second time I cut up some fruit bread for the pair of you.'

'She's tired, Dad. Had a busy day. It was our floor manager's birthday and they made a bit of a fuss in the canteen. She's been with the firm for fifteen years.'

'Mum! You said I had a visitor.'

'And you've still got one.' Laura's broad smile was catching. Kay and her grandfather looked at each other and grinned.

'Male or female?' Kay asked, knowing somehow it was male and yet not understanding why her parents weren't hitting the roof. Chris might speak perfect English, but he had Spanish eyes all right.

'Male. Dark hair. Very attractive.'

'Chris?' Kay couldn't believe it.

'No, love. I think his name is Zacchi.' Laura couldn't contain herself. She was as excited as Kay should have been.

'Zacchi?' She could hardly believe it. 'But how do you know it's him?'

'Because your dad said so.'

'And he doesn't mind him turning up?'

'No. He sounded quite chuffed.'

Grabbing her handbag, Kay ran from the cottage

out of the courtyard and through the backstreets, almost knocking over a woman as she stepped out of Higgins's, the corner shop. 'Sorry!' she yelled back, not stopping until she finally arrived at the stairs leading up to the second-floor flat where Zacchi would be waiting. She leaned on the white-tiled wall and caught her breath.

'Where've you been, Kay? He's been 'ere for about two hours.' Jack seemed far from pleased.

'Looking for a job, Dad. It does take time, you know.'

'I've run out of things to talk about,' he whispered.

'What does he look like?'

'What d'yer think he looks like? An old man? It's only been just over two years.'

'Nearly three, actually.'

'Anyway, go and see for yourself. I'll put the kettle on. He's in the front room.'

'Dad!' Kay whispered.

He turned and looked at her. 'What?'

'Do I look all right?'

''Course you do.'

'Not too – you know, smart?'

Smiling, he stroked her hair and admired her face. 'You look lovely. Now go in and see 'im.'

Slowly pushing open the door to the living room, Kay tried to stop herself grinning like an idiot.

'Hallo, Zac.'

Spinning round on the heels of his black cowboy boots, Zacchi faced her, looking shy and awkward in his Italian suit. 'You've had your hair cut,' was all he managed to say.

'Yeah. On Saturday.'

'I like it,' he smiled. 'It suits you.'

'Thanks.'

There was a pause while each wondered what to say next. Kay was completely lost for words. There was so much to talk about, but she couldn't think of anything to say. He did look different. Especially in a suit. She hadn't expected that.

'We've left the road,' Zacchi suddenly said. 'Joined the settled travellers.'

'You're kidding?'

'No. It's getting more difficult now, finding places to stop, seasonal work. Gypsies are out of fashion.' He flashed her a smile.

'That's terrible, Zacchi. Your family must hate it.'

Shrugging, he looked out of the window. 'It's not all bad. It means the young ones can go to school.' He turned to face her. 'We're not in a council house, not yet. We're on a site with other travellers. It's a bit like living on the common. Hop-picking.'

'Can't knock that.' Kay was wandering from the

conversation again, looking into that familiar handsome face and those dark blue eyes. His wavy hair was just as thick and shiny, maybe a bit shorter.

Zacchi played with a cuff-link on his shirtsleeve. 'I don't suppose you feel like going for a walk?'

'I thought you'd never ask.'

Popping his head round the door, Jack asked Kay if she wanted tea or coffee. He didn't look too perturbed when she told him they were going out.

'Thanks for your hospitality, Mr Armstrong,' Zacchi said, shaking Jack's hand.

'That's all right, son. And good luck with your new job.' He winked at him and squeezed Zacchi's hand in a fatherly fashion. 'You'll soon get used to the nine-to-five routine.'

Strolling hand in hand they walked under the railway arch, heading for Bethnal Green park. It amused Zacchi the way Kay's voice suddenly had an echo, and before long they were making whooping war cries between bursts of laughter.

'This isn't the way I imagined it would be.' Zacchi put his arm around Kay's shoulder and kissed her lightly on the cheek. 'I didn't really know what to expect, but I never dreamed we'd be standing under an arch making silly echoes.'

'I never imagined you in a suit.'

'No. Neither did I. It goes with the job.'

'What's that?'

He took her hand again and for the first time looked relaxed and happy. 'It's all your fault! I've spent the past two years studying to take an O-level in English – while we were still on the road. It started with my buying a dictionary so I could look up some impressive words when I wrote to you.'

'But you never did write, Zacchi.'

'No. I decided to wait.' He pulled her close to him. 'And here I am.'

'You still haven't told me what your job is.'

'Well, because of my years spent travelling and because I seem to have a way with words, and . . .'

'The poetry! Of course, I'd forgotten you wrote all those lovely poems.'

'The pay's not brilliant but it's really good, having my own weekly column . . .' He waited for her reaction.

'I don't suppose you've got any of your poems with you? The ones you wrote specially for me, for instance?'

'. . . "Travelling the Dusty Road – Around Britain". The circulation figures have gone up since they took me on.'

'What are you talking about, Zacchi?'

'I'm a feature writer on the local rag, the Walthamstow *Guardian*.'

Kay stared at him, hardly able to take it in. Zacchi, a professional journalist? Her gypsy boyfriend doing something she had always secretly wanted to do? 'Honestly, Zac? You're not pulling my leg?'

'No I'm not,' he laughed, 'but if you're offering . . .'

Feeling herself blush, she looked away, her mind suddenly full of the time when she almost lost her virginity to him. Then, remembering her own sorry state of affairs, she went quiet.

'I was joking, Kay.'

'I know.' She didn't want to think about that side of their relationship which, as far as she could see, had been ruined by her holiday romance.

Turning into the gateway leading to the park, Kay suggested they sit on the low wall that surrounded the large paddling pond. 'That's old Sid,' she smiled, nodding towards an elderly man handing out tracts to passers-by. 'Bible Sid. He'll start singing a hymn soon and if we're lucky, dancing too.'

Zacchi took Kay's hand and stroked her fingers with the tip of his thumb. 'I said I would come for you, one day—'

'I told you, didn't I?' she interrupted. 'There he goes. The kids love him.' They looked across at the smiling old man.

'Don't the parents worry?'

'No, never. Sid's been around since I can remember. He's harmless. Never begs. Never asks for anything. Some people reckon he's really a millionaire, an eccentric. It wouldn't surprise me.'

'I still feel the same about you, Kay.' He gazed at her face. 'Why won't you look at me?'

'Zacchi—' She felt herself blushing again and wondered if she would ever grow out of it. 'There's something—'

'Don't you mean some*one*? Someone else?'

Kay dropped her head back and sighed. 'It's hopeless, Zac.'

'Why?' His voice, as ever, was sincere.

'I went to Spain earlier this year. For a holiday. I met someone. Chris. He looked so much like you.' She bit her bottom lip and wondered if she should stop there.

'He's the first real boyfriend since you.' She said it quickly. 'And I'm afraid this time I didn't stop when I should have.' There. It was out. The ball was in his court.

He slowly withdrew his hand from hers, and she could feel his body tense even though they weren't touching. She wanted to say how sorry she was and yet somehow that would have been disloyal to Chris, whom she did, or at least she thought she

did, love. Now that Zacchi was close to her again, she wasn't sure.

'I've been tempted enough times,' he said, 'but it would have been for sex and nothing else. I chose to bury myself in my study and writing instead. I was daft enough to believe you might wait for me.'

'Well that's a bit much, isn't it? Nearly three years and not a word from you! As far as I was concerned you'd wiped me out!'

'It wasn't that easy for me.' His voice was shot through with disappointment.

'Well why *didn't* you write?' she cried, not caring about two women who were sitting close by, listening intently.

'I did write!' He lowered his voice. 'I just couldn't bring myself to send the letters. I don't know why. I don't know.'

Narrowing her eyes, Kay studied his face. 'I don't think I believe you.'

'Thanks.'

They sat there while Sid drew people towards him on the opposite side of the pond. Kay began to feel as if she were sitting next to a stranger. Part of her wanted to suggest they make their way back, and another part wanted to stay with him and rekindle the special feelings they had shared.

'I had a lot of girlfriends before you, Kay. Some I

liked a lot more than others. I even thought I loved a couple of them. Then I met you. And I realized what love meant.' He slowly shook his head. 'I loved you so much, a day didn't go by when I wasn't making plans. Thinking about the future, reliving the past, helped me live the present. And if you think that sounds too corny, then you'll know why I couldn't bring myself to post the love letters I wrote you.'

'I felt the same,' Kay kept her head lowered. 'The difference was that I didn't have an address to write to. I had to wait until you contacted me. I had to get through every day trying to hold the smell of your spicy soap in my mind.'

Zacchi chuckled and shook his head. 'That soap meant more to you than I did.'

'At least you took the trouble to use it today,' she murmured, trying not to smile.

'I had to twist my uncle's arm to get it. You can't buy it in the shops. My grandmother made it to an old family recipe.'

'And she doesn't any more?'

'No. She died last year. That's when my family decided to settle down. We burned her wagon. It's an old gypsy custom.'

'I'm sorry, Zacchi. It must have been traumatic giving up your way of life.'

'It was. But we're adjusting. So long as we stick

together, we'll be OK.' He was bending over now, resting his elbows on his knees, his head lowered.

'My uncle Bert died, too. Earlier this year.' Kay could feel the old familiar sadness sweep over her.

'That must have been hard for your aunt Liz.'

Kay was touched that he still remembered her family. 'She's still getting over it. We all are.'

'I'm still in love with you, Kay.'

Covering her face with her hands, Kay willed herself not to cry. 'The trouble is—' she stopped. The words stuck in her throat. How could she tell him she might be having Chris's baby?

'Go on.' His voice was serious, almost as if he had picked up on the gravity of the situation.

'You'll hate me,' she warned.

'Maybe.'

'I think I might be pregnant.'

Zacchi wanted to hear no more. He stood up, and keeping his back to her, composed himself and walked away. Kay made no move to leave. She sat staring into the pond, at the ripples made by a few children who were still paddling.

When she finally checked the clock hanging on the wall of the umbrella factory just outside the park, it was five minutes to seven. The park keeper would be locking the gates in five minutes. She had been

sitting there for over an hour and it had seemed like seconds.

Sid had moved to her side of the pond and sat near by, his Bible and hymn-book on his lap. They were the only two there. As she gazed blankly at him, he turned his head sideways and smiled back at her. Then, without thinking, she walked up to him and sat down.

'Hallo, Sid,' she said quietly.

'There's no point worrying. If it's going to happen, it will,' he said, not looking at her.

'It already has.'

'I don't see a happening.' He studied the air around them.

'How could you see what's inside me?' she said, hoping he wouldn't realize what it was she had allowed to slip out.

'If it's inside – it hasn't happened. When it's outside, and you can see it, touch it—'

'Do you know what I'm talking about?'

'It's more important that *you* do.' He stood up, doffing his battered trilby. Then, with one hand flat on his Bible he smiled. 'Thou shalt not kill.'

Kay sat by herself for the last couple of minutes. Sid always left her with a feeling of comfort inside, a safe feeling. Even when she was a child and listened to him with the rest of the crowd, he was

special, and somehow managed to find his way into people's hearts.

Thou shalt not kill. His voice hung in her mind. He needn't have worried. That was the last thing she intended to do. If there was a baby growing inside, she would feed it until it was ready to come out into the big wide world. Then she would love it and protect it.

With her hand on her stomach, she wondered if it might be a girl or a boy. She was no longer filled with worry, but with a warmth which she would share with no one until she was sure. She would make an appointment with the doctor before going home.

'He seemed decent enough,' Jack said from behind his newspaper. 'Get rid of that earring, and you'd never guess he was a gyppo.'

'That'd be a shame. It's what I find most attractive about him,' Kay retorted, knowing that was the best way to deal with her dad when he pretended he was racist.

'You'll be buying a wagon next and going on the road.'

'Chance would be a fine thing.'

Jack bent back his newspaper and looked quizzically at her. 'You think you'd enjoy not being able to take a bath when you wanted, do you?'

Not wishing to get into a no-win argument, Kay changed the subject. 'Do you think I could have my letters now? You know, the ones from Spain?'

'Don't know what you're talking about.' He shook his paper and hid his face.

'I've got a friend in the sorting office, so I know there's been letters for me. And I want them!'

'Top drawer in the sideboard. You should 'ave asked before now, I'd forgotten about them.'

'Liar!' She stormed out of the kitchen.

'If you think you're going out there to see a Spaniard, you've got another think coming! Why can't you go out with a local boy? Make life a bit easier, wouldn't it?' he called after her.

In the privacy of her room, Kay sat on the edge of the bed and began to open her letters. She had put them in date order, and opened the first one. It was full of love and promise. Chris wanted her to go back out there for a holiday in the autumn. He even offered to pay half her expenses. The second letter was full of questions. Why hadn't she answered? Had she met someone else? Maybe she had written and the letter had gone astray? The third was all disappointment; the fourth and fifth angry, hurt and desperate.

'How could you have done this?' The tears were pouring down her cheeks. 'He's practically suicidal!'

'I couldn't see the point!' Jack spat back, aloof.

'We loved each other! Isn't that enough? Does there have to be a point?' Kay knew she was hysterical, but the tone of Chris's last letter had been so awful all she wanted was to be with him, to tell him what had happened; to tell him she did love him.

'If you'd met him, you'd never treat him like this!' She gripped the letters angrily in one hand, waving them in Jack's sorry face. 'Read them! Read what you've put him through, and then tell me you were right!'

Jack covered his face with his hands. 'All right, babe. I was wrong. I'm sorry, I shouldn't 'ave done it.' He sighed loudly. 'I can be a silly bastard at times.' He reached out and pulled Kay close, patting her back the way he used to when she was a baby.

'I didn't wanna lose you. I don't want you living a million miles away.'

'It's not even three *hours* away.'

'Yeah, I s'pose that's one way of looking at it.' He gazed into her face. 'You're not scheming up any more wild ideas, are yer? Forging a passport once was bloody risky, a second time would mean prison.'

'I wouldn't do that. I can wait till next year. But at least he should know why I can't go till then.'

'Who is he, anyway? I don't know a thing about 'im.' Jack found it difficult not to show his frustration.

'He was born and bred in this country. He doesn't even have a Spanish accent. And he went to a good school. Better than the one I went to!'

'So what's he doing out there then?' Jack looked relieved.

'It's his family's village. His grandparents are there and some of his other relatives. He's got a small bakery. It's what he's always wanted.'

'He's what?' Jack's eyes narrowed.

'Bought his own bakery.' Kay read his mind. 'He's only twenty-two, Dad, and he bought it from an uncle, so it didn't cost the earth.' She gave him a wink to lighten things. 'You should taste his hot bread, Dad. It's out of this world. And the cakes.'

'I suppose you'd better phone 'im,' Jack said indifferently.

'Phone?' Kay could hardly believe it. It would cost a fortune.

'Well it's cheaper than going out there, innit? Go on.' He tapped one of the letters she held in her hand. 'Look. He's put the number in the corner.'

'You really mean it?' She felt like screaming for joy.

'Yeah, go on. But keep it short!'

* * *

'Well, where is he?' Laura unpacked some shopping from her bag on to the kitchen table.

'Who?' Jack knew very well who, but he was in one of his mischievous moods.

'Zacchi of course.'

'Dunno. They went out for a walk; she came back by herself.' He shrugged. 'Then she spent over an hour on the phone to Spain.'

'She did *what*?'

'Well, five minutes anyway. It felt like an hour. Christ knows what it cost.'

'Jack. What's going on. What has Zacchi coming here got to do with her phoning Spain?'

'Search me. She's in her room. Go and ask 'er.'

'I think I will.' Laura marched out of the kitchen and rapped on her door.

'Not now!' came the sorry reply.

'Kay? What's wrong?'

'I'll tell you later, Mum! I need to be by myself.'

'She's not crying, is she?' Jack joined Laura at Kay's door. They both stood there wondering what to do next.

'He doesn't want to know me any more. I couldn't tell him that Dad hid the letters, so I lied and said I'd been too ill to write. He didn't believe me!'

'I warned you.' Laura pointed a finger into Jack's

face. 'I said something like this would happen!' She stormed into the kitchen.

'Hiding your daughter's letters! You and your stupid Victorian attitudes! Don't blame me if she ups and leaves!'

Jack turned his back on her and stared out of the window at nothing. 'Of all the nerve. Who does he think he is, doesn't wanna know? Doesn't wanna know our Kay? I'll strangle the little bastard.'

'Yeah, that's it, Jack. Turn it around. Put the blame somewhere else. Like you always do!'

He turned to face her, his eyes fiery with anger. She'd never seen him look so menacing. 'Good job he's miles away,' she murmured, half smiling.

'I'll phone 'im. Yeah. That's it. Go and get one of them letters. The number'll be on it.' Jack tapped a roll-up on the lid of his tin. 'I'll soon knock the little drip off his pedestal.'

'No!' Laura was unhesitating. 'Definitely no!'

Jack spread his hands in the air and shrugged. 'I can't just leave it, Laura. Either I phone, or I push my fist through a window.'

'You'll do neither. Because both would be costly, and I'm not gonna add to the expense that boy's cost us already!' She hoped that would bring Jack's temper down enough to make him see reason.

'So what then?' he demanded pathetically.

'So we leave it. I'm afraid she's gonna have to learn to deal with her own heartaches. Everyone has to in the end. You've got to learn to let her go, Jack.'

Drawing hard on his cigarette, he nodded. 'You're a lot of help.'

'How d'yer think I feel? I wasn't cast in iron, you know.'

'I know.' He stretched out one arm and pulled her to him. 'When does it end, eh? The pain we go through with kids?'

'Never, according to Liz. She still worries about her David and his snooty wife.'

'Yeah, but it's different with us and our Kay.'

'Everyone thinks that about their own. We all love the little sods too much for our own good.'

'Yeah. You can say that again.'

Sitting on Pamela's bed with the pillows propped behind her, Kay waited for her friend to put the finishing touches to her make-up. She hadn't told her about the visit from Zacchi that day, or the call to Spain. She would wait until she had her full attention.

'So when do you start this new and exciting job?' Mouth gaping, Pamela brushed on more mascara.

'Tomorrow.'

'Blimey. Don't give you much time to dwell on it, do they?'

'I didn't ask for time, I wanted to start straight away. No point sitting around being bored.'

'I dunno,' Pamela admired her reflection. 'Some people have all the luck.' She turned to face Kay. 'You don't seem very excited. I'll go in your place if you like and you can take my boring old job. If I 'ave to fill in another claims form I'll go mad.'

'Are you ready yet?' Kay was beginning to lose patience. She had been there for over an hour while Pamela titivated herself. They were, after all, only going for a drink in the Black Boy and it being a Monday, it was unlikely that any of the usual crowd would be there.

'Does this new lipstick suit?' Pamela puckered her pale apricot lips.

'I prefer the pink you usually wear.'

'You don't like it.' She picked up a tissue ready to wipe it off.

'I do! I just prefer you in pink. I'll get used to it. Now leave it alone!'

'Sorry for breathing.'

'Well, what d'yer expect? I want to go *out*,' she snapped. Lowering her voice, she trailed her finger round a flowing leaf on Pamela's bedspread. 'I've got loads to tell yer.'

'Like what?' Pamela pulled on a baggy mohair cardigan. The deep purple made her big brown eyes stand out more than ever.

'Like who my visitor was today. And who I spoke to on the phone – long distance.' Kay suddenly felt lighter. As pleased as punch.

Unable to stop a cocky smile spreading across her face, she began to chuckle. Pamela stared at her forlornly. 'I've got their number,' Kay sang tauntingly.

'You liar!'

'Suit yourself.' Kay slipped down from the pillows and stretched herself out on the bed. 'It was as if he were standing in the same room,' she said, full of swank.

'Where'd you get his number from then, Miss Clever-drawers?'

'From one of the letters he sent me.'

Pamela turned back to the mirror and carefully wiped off the apricot lipstick. 'I'm sure,' she murmured.

'He sent four in all.' Kay's mind clouded over as she remembered how her dad had ruined their relationship. 'My dad kept the letters back,' she said. 'He thought he was doing it in my best interests.'

'Kay!' Pamela sounded angry. 'Stop messing

about. You know how depressed I've been not hearing from Charles!'

'He lost your address. Chris wrote that Charles asked if I would get you to write.' Kay pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. 'Here. I've written it down for yer.'

Snatching it from her friend, Pamela screeched with joy until her mother appeared in the doorway. 'What's happened?' She turned to Kay. 'You told her she looked like a model with that new lipstick?'

'Charles lost my address!' She brought her face close to her mother's. 'He lost it. That's why he hasn't been in touch.' She kissed the piece of paper. 'I knew he loved me.'

Lillian raised her eyebrows and shrugged. 'I suppose he's a goy?'

'He's Spanish! And if I have to, I'll convert to Catholicism!'

'Sure you will.' With a smug half-smile on her face, Lillian closed the door behind her, leaving the girls to themselves.

'If I said that to my mum or dad, they'd hit the roof.'

'Why? This faith, that faith, what's the difference? We're all flesh and blood underneath.' She kissed the piece of paper again. 'Give me his phone number! I must talk to him.'

'I don't have it. Only Chris's. And I'm certainly not giving that to you. Not after what he said to me.' Kay turned her back on Pamela and wondered why she didn't actually feel sad any more. She wondered why it was Zacchi's face that filled her mind instead.

'What d'yer mean?' Pamela circled the bed. 'Kay, what did he say?'

'He's gone back with his fiancé. A local girl. I was on the rebound.' Kay sat up and hugged her knees. 'He blamed it on the fact that he wrote four letters for my one. Said he had suffered so much pain, and when she appeared in the doorway one day he realized how much he had loved her.'

'I can't believe it,' Pamela shook her head. 'You're not messing about, either, are you.'

'It's OK. I've done my crying. And that's what gets me really mad. I vowed I wasn't gonna let anyone make me cry again and I did. I hate him for that.' She turned the signet ring on her right hand. 'Zacchi was so warm and oh, I dunno, kind of loving, in a way.'

'Zacchi?' Pamela looked totally confused. 'Today is Monday, isn't it. And I did see you yesterday? And none of this had happened then?'

'All in a day!' Kay forced a smile. 'I gained a new career and lost two boyfriends. Not bad, eh?'

'Lost?'

'Yeah. Come on, let's go for a drink. I'll tell you on the way.'

Walking along the Mile End Road, Kay filled Pamela in, except on the one worry that she was keeping to herself. She couldn't bring herself to tell her best friend her worst fears, or about her visit to the doctor. The two pills he had given her were in an envelope in her handbag. She was to take them that evening and if she wasn't pregnant, her period would come the next day or so. She was almost too scared to take them in case nothing happened.

It was the best thing that could have happened, Tommy and Micky being in the Black Boy. They looked handsome leaning against the bar, each enjoying a pint. Kay looked from them to Pamela. 'Look who's here.'

She felt sure they would take her mind off Zacchi, even though she found herself wishing he would walk in.

'Oh, you made it then,' Pamela said in her haughty way.

'Wouldn't miss it for the world,' said Tommy, looking at Kay.

'You might 'ave told me!' Kay was caught off

guard, and was embarrassed that he wouldn't take his eyes off her.

'Haven't seen you around lately,' Tommy slipped between Kay and Pamela, trying to separate her from the group.

'Life's been a bit hectic since Spain,' Kay smiled shyly back at him.

'What she means is that we've been spending time seeing how the other half live.' Pamela showed a limp wrist. 'Her friend Terry's been showing us the town.'

'Oh yeah? Gay, was it?' Micky threw his head back and laughed. 'Hope we're not too butch for yer!'

'No.' Kay looked them up and down, an impertinent smirk on her face.

Enjoying her sense of humour, Tommy walked over to the jukebox while his friend ordered the drinks. Kay watched him as he studied the labels and thought what a coincidence it would be if he chose the same song as Chris had done in Spain.

'This is just for you.' He winked at Kay as Bobby Vee's voice filled the room with 'Rubber Ball'.

Lying in bed that night, Kay lined up in her imagination the three young men she had spoken to that day and measured each against the other. Zacchi

definitely came out on top but he was the only one who knew her secret, so she didn't want to face him again. Tommy came second for his good looks and the modern way he dressed. And Chris came last. Had he not told her rather belatedly that he had been engaged before they met, he would have come out on top and she would be making plans to fly out there the following year, 1963, quite possibly with his baby in her arms.

Deciding not to take the pills that night for fear of anything spoiling her first day at her new job she turned over, buried her head in her pillow and quietly prayed that everything would turn out all right. It had been a long, eventful day and within a minute of closing her eyes, Kay fell into a deep sleep.

'The Managing Director wishes to meet you, Kay. Please follow me.' Rebecca Jamieson was wearing a smart, tight-fitting black dress and a beautiful diamond necklace. 'Let's not keep him waiting.'

Jamieson had left Thompson's and was now working for Waterman's. Kay pushed her chair back ready to stand, but on looking down was shocked to see that she had forgotten to put on the skirt she had laid out the night before and was wearing only one stocking. The suspenders from the horrid old-fashioned pink roll-on were dangling down one

leg, the elastic so old and loose that the button and clip almost touched her knee.

Leaning on the reception desk, Jamieson pushed her head closer to Kay. 'You're going to have to stand up, you know. You can't hide behind that desk all day. Get up! Now!'

Hot and panicky, Kay pleaded with her, but the words in her mind were not the ones that left her mouth. She was saying the wrong things and her head felt as if it were on fire and would burst into flames. Dripping with perspiration she wiped her legs with her damp dress and was horrified to see the dark red liquid oozing from her and dripping onto the light carpet.

'Get up! The Chairman is coming.' There was an evil sickly smile on Jamieson's face.

'No! Please, no! It hurts! I'm in pain! I want my mother! Please phone for my mother!'

'Your mother is in the next office. She doesn't want to see you.'

Kay looked through a window, and could see Laura. She called out to her, but she just threw her a look of disgust and carried on with her work.
'MUMMY! MUMMY, PLEASE! HELP ME!'

'Kay . . . ? Oh Kay, baby, it's all right.' Laura was at Kay's bedside in a flash, cradling and rocking her daughter. 'Just a nightmare, love. Just a silly dream.'

'Mum! I've got cramp! It's worse than I've *ever* had before.' Kay gripped Laura's arm as a searing pain shot through her womb.

Shocked by Kay's harrowing scream, Laura whipped back the bedcovers to see that her daughter was lying in a pool of sticky blood. Grabbing her mother by the arms again, Kay caught her breath as her stomach contracted and another pain pierced her.

'All right, baby, all right. Just lie still. Don't move.' Realising the gravity of the situation, Laura felt herself shiver.

'It's just a heavy period, isn't it?' Kay dragged the covers back over herself and dropped back on to her pillow, looking deathly white.

'I expect so.' Laura spun around as Jack arrived. 'Don't ask questions,' Laura warned, 'just sit there and hold her hand.'

'Where are you going?' Jack's eyes were heavy with sleep.

'To phone the doctor!'

Another cry from Kay snapped Jack into action. He was by her side and holding her before he could think.

'It's a late period, Dad, that's all.' Kay went limp in his arms.

Smiling bravely into her face, he stroked Kay's

perspiration-damp hair. 'Try to relax, eh?' He closed his hand around hers and prayed that the worst hadn't happened. 'I'll run you a nice warm bath in a minute.'

While they waited for the emergency doctor to arrive, Laura busied herself, making Kay as comfortable as she could, after changing the sheets. Jack had been sent into the kitchen where he could let go of his bottled-up emotion in private and make them all some hot, sweet tea.

'It's more than just blood, isn't it, Mum?' Kay turned her head away as Laura carefully slid the heavily soiled sheet into a plastic bag.

'Try not to think about it.'

'I've never known pain like that before. You *will* tell the doctor how bad it was!' She arched her back again and struggled with another minor contraction. 'In case it gets bad again,' she managed to say.

Laura looked into Kay's drawn face. 'How bad is it now?'

'Worse than a normal period.' She laid back and sighed with relief as the pain subsided. 'It was as if a knife was—'

'Yeah all right.' Laura didn't want to hear the rest. She glanced at the small alarm clock on Kay's bedside table and was just about to say that the doctor should be here by now when the doorbell rang.

'It's barely termed as a miscarriage, Mrs Armstrong but your daughter was five or six weeks pregnant. It looks as if she's passed as many clots as she's likely to and the flow seems to be easing. A few days bed-rest and she'll be fine. Just keep her warm and comfortable.'

Laura nodded, avoiding the doctor's eyes. 'We didn't . . . Kay didn't . . .' She took a deep breath. 'It's not an abortion.' She blurted out the words quickly, wanting to get that bit over with.

The doctor smiled. 'I realise that. We *can* tell you know. I doubt if she has had intercourse more than two or three times in her life.'

'Well, that's something to be thankful for, I suppose.'

'At seventeen? I would have thought so. These days.'

Once the doctor had gone and Kay had been given pain killers, Laura braced herself to face Jack. Now he really would have to accept the fact that his baby-girl had experienced full womanhood. Like it or not.

Wrapped in her towelling dressing gown, curled up in an armchair, Kay thanked her lucky stars. One way or another, Mother Nature had seen fit to map out the following year or so of her life.

'I'll have to go to work, Kay, but Dad'll get you anything you want. He'll only be gone a couple of hours.' Laura handed her a milky drink.

'Did Mrs Jarold really sound OK about my not turning up?'

'Yes, for the third time. I told her you had a stomach bug as well as a period and that you wouldn't be taking a day off every month. She was fine about it. OK?' She kissed Kay on the forehead. 'Stop worrying.'

'Thanks, Mum.'

'You'll be all right, then?'

'Yeah.' She waved a library book. 'It'll be nice to get in some reading.'

'Charles Dickens again?' Laura sounded pleased. 'You'll be so well read, we soon won't be able to talk to you.'

'Did I tell you that Zacchi's a feature writer?'

Standing by the door, Laura smiled back at Kay. 'Yes, love, you did. And I'm just as proud of him as you are.'

Once alone, Kay laid her book down on the arm of her chair and closed her eyes, thinking about Zacchi. She tried to put herself in his place and imagine how she would have felt if he had told her he had met someone else and that she was having his baby. She would have hated it.

Full of remorse at having broken her promise to wait for him, she decided to write a letter saying she was sorry. With pen poised, she tried to think of the right words to say. For ten minutes she sat staring at the blank page until it dawned on her why she wasn't scribbling away like mad. She was sorry she hadn't waited . . . but she didn't think she should apologize. Zacchi should have written to her. How was she to know if he was ever going to contact her after two and a half years? No: he was to blame, not her. She would not write.

Tossing the pen and notepad to the floor, she continued to read *The Old Curiosity Shop*. If Zacchi was half as interested in her as she was in him, he would get in touch. If not, at least she knew where she stood.

Ten minutes later, Kay was asking Directory Enquiries for the number of the Walthamstow *Guardian*.

Not knowing quite what to say to him once she was put through, Kay found herself asking why he had walked away from her the day before.

'If you don't know, there's no point in my trying to explain,' he said flatly.

'I'm not pregnant, by the way,' she blurted, 'if that's what bothered you!'

There was a pause. 'Why did you say you were then?'

'I thought I was. Today proved different. I'm at home. I couldn't go to work and it was my first day as well.'

'Did you love him?' Zacchi was never one for mincing his words.

'I thought I did till you turned up.'

'I'll come and see you at the weekend.' Still there was no enthusiasm in his voice. 'Saturday morning, around eleven. I hope you feel better soon.' With that he replaced the receiver.

Feeling frustrated, Kay slammed the phone down. She had hardly said anything to him. She hadn't said how sorry she was, or how she couldn't stop thinking about him. Saturday seemed a lifetime away.

Chapter Twelve

At the end of her first week as receptionist/copy typist at Waterman's, Kay was feeling pleased with herself. Standing in front of the large pink-tinted mirror in Reception, she admired the new Italian suit she had bought in Petticoat Lane that lunch-time.

'Prince of Wales check. It suits you.' Mrs Jarold's sunny face smiled in the mirror as she stood behind Kay. The Staff Liaison Officer had taken a liking to Kay and Kay to her.

'You've made a good impression, you know. The editor of *Stock Market* wants to know if you can be transferred to his department.'

'Really?' Kay beamed, but then remembered that her shorthand wasn't as good as it could be. 'I don't suppose he uses a dictaphone?'

A look of concern came to Mrs Jarold's face. 'I thought you could work with one?'

'I can. I was worried in case he might want a shorthand typist.'

'Ah,' the smile returned to her face. 'No, my boss is the only old-fashioned one here. So? What do you think?'

Kay wasn't sure. She really enjoyed dealing with clients and having a bit of fun with the journalists when they dropped by for a chat. She would miss that. And the *Stock Market* wasn't exactly the most exciting journal.

'Can I let you know on Monday?'

'Of course you can.' She pushed open the smoked glass main door. 'I suppose I had better tell you that the *Mirror* has asked for you as well.' She winked at Kay. 'But don't let it go to your head.'

Staring after her as she walked out of the building, Kay couldn't help feeling thrilled.

'Have a good weekend!' A tall, dark-haired attractive woman in her early thirties passed Kay on her way out of the building.

'Excuse me!' Kay called after her.

Stopping in her tracks, she turned to face Kay. 'Yes?'

'Don't you work for *Female Weekly*?'

'Excellent memory! You've only been to our department once. We must have made an impression,' she smiled.

'Yeah, you did. There's kind of a buzz.'

'Glad you picked up on it. We're not always buzzing, though. It's a nightmare the day before we go to print. Tempers get a bit frayed to say the least.' She pushed the door open with her shoulder and gave Kay a show of her hand. 'See you Monday.'

That was it: that was her goal. Kay would ask if there were any chance of her working her way towards being part of *Female Weekly*'s team. She would turn down *Stock Market* and continue in Reception until a vacancy came up. It was a strange feeling, but she just knew by instinct that she would find her niche on that busy weekly, should the opportunity arise.

Squeezing into the stuffy carriage on the underground, this time Kay didn't mind being squashed like a sardine. She couldn't wait to tell her parents about the new job offers. Her mind went back to Thompson's and found herself believing in fate. If it hadn't been for that terrible incident she would never have left. She would still be working in that backwater instead of experiencing a thriving, lively company.

Her thoughts began to race. Maybe she would go to evening classes and learn about journalism. Maybe she could be trained as an editor. She had already

done a bit of proofreading for one of the journalists and she had only been working there four days. If she could achieve that much in such a short time, what could she achieve in a lifetime? Or at least before she settled into marriage and having children. She couldn't remember a time when she felt as happy and optimistic.

Walking home through Bethnal Green park, passing a couple of heavy drinkers who were sleeping it off, she wondered what it would be like to have her own flat in another part of town. Not that she didn't like living in the East End, but London was a big place and Kay had often felt the desire to live in other areas. A whole new life was out there, and in her mind's eye she likened it to a large cut-crystal globe, each facet showing a different Technicolor film, a hundred worlds existing at the same time.

'Hallo, babe. Your mum said you would be along any minute.' Frank and Freddie were walking down the stairs as Kay was on her way up. 'Like your new haircut. Suits yer,' her curly-headed uncle grinned.

'We was hoping to see you, Kay,' Frank said, slipping his hand into an inside pocket. 'This is for you.' He handed her a thick white envelope.

'What is it?' She had a horrible feeling she knew.

'It fell off the back of a van. Enjoy spending

it but don't let Mum or Dad know. They'd do their nuts.'

Laughing quietly, Frank carried on down the stairs. 'I take it there was no comeback for you?' he asked, a hopeful look on his face.

Trying to stop herself grinning, Kay slowly shook her head. 'I can't take this.'

'Now don't be a silly girl! That place deserved what it got and you deserve that. You don't have to spend it straight away, all at once, like. Wait till you see something you want.'

Leaving her speechless, they disappeared down the next flight of stairs. 'If you wanna bring your friends to the Kentucky, make it a Monday when it's quiet.' Frank's voice echoed in the stairwell.

Leaning over the green-painted metal banisters, Kay called down to them. 'Will Reg be there?'

'Probably . . . with his fiancée!'

Going directly to her room, Kay sat on the edge of the bed and drew a wad of banknotes out of the envelope. She felt a deep thrill as she began counting. Two hundred and fifty pounds. She swept her fingers across the fanned notes and wondered if she dared use it.

Hearing footsteps in the passage, she pushed the money back into the envelope and tossed it on top of the wardrobe.

'I thought I heard you come in,' Laura stood in the doorway. 'Zacchi phoned. Said he won't be able to make it tomorrow after all. He's got to cover a story.'

'You reckon?' Kay could feel herself sink. 'I'm not the same fifteen-year-old he fell in love with.'

Laura let out a throaty chuckle. 'Anyone'd think you were an old woman.' Stroking Kay's hair, she tried to stop herself smiling. 'So he's coming tonight instead.'

'Mum, that's not funny! You could have said.'

'I just did.'

'Yeah. Bit late though.'

''Cos you let your mum see how much you like him?' Laura teased. 'You won't need any tea.' Cocking her head to one side, she affected a cut-glass accent. 'He's taking you out to dinner. Do you want me to run you a bath? While I press whatever madam decides to wear?'

'My herring-bone suit and white short sleeves'll be all right, won't it? Or the pink and navy?'

Leaving the room, Laura told her not to worry – whatever she wore, she would knock Zacchi for six, if she hadn't already.

Knock him for six. The words rang around her head. Maybe that was the order of the day? She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and doubt

clouded her mind. *I'm not the same though, am I. I'm not a virgin any more. He's probably taking me out to dinner to tell me it's over before it all starts up again. He's probably guessed that I was pregnant.*

Opening the drawer of her dressing table, she took out the false eyelashes she had bought but never worn. Tonight they would get an airing. If Pamela could wear them, so could she.

Pamela! She suddenly remembered. 'Mum!' She stepped into the passage. 'I'm supposed to be going to the Black Boy with Pam!'

'Phone her! She'll understand!' Showing her face in the kitchen doorway, Laura shrugged. 'It had to happen sometime, Kay. You're both gonna get dates, and not always in a foursome.

'Did you pass Frank and Freddie by the way? They left just before you came in.'

Kay slipped back into her bedroom. 'They just said hallo and goodbye.'

'I'm not sure why they came, really,' Laura called back. 'Probably wanted to see your dad about something.'

'Dunno!'

Pleased that she had managed to get the false eyelashes on without making her eyes water, Kay applied a touch of mascara, remembering that Zacchi

didn't think much of painted faces. She slicked on just a touch of ice-pink lipstick.

'He's here, Kay!' yelled Laura from the kitchen. Seconds later there was a knock at the door.

Zacchi stood on the doorstep looking as handsome as ever. 'I'm ready, but you can come in if you like.'

'I've waited too long to share you with anyone else.' He held out his hand and smiled.

Arm in arm, their stormy parting forgotten, they walked slowly through the backstreets. It was as if the three-year gap had never been. 'Where do you want to go?' Zacchi asked.

'Don't mind.'

Then without warning, he grabbed her by both arms and pulled her to him, not caring about the passers-by. They melted into a long kiss. 'I was mad to think there wouldn't be anyone else, Kay.'

'I did wait, Zac, I really did. But being in Spain and him looking so much like you—'

'That's history. Now it's just you and me.'

'Do you know what I would really like to do? Show you around the East End. Show you that it's not quite as Dickensian as people think.'

'If you must,' he groaned.

Carrying two cups of tea to a table in the canteen at

Hammond's, Laura waited for Liz to join her. She always took her tea-break when her sister-in-law was not so busy. That way they could sit and natter.

'You seemed a bit quiet at lunch-time.' Laura bit off the corner of her biscuit and waited.

'Did I?' Liz kept her eyes down. 'Bit tired, that's all.'

'Sure?'

'Yes, Laura. I'm sure. Stop digging.'

'There is something to dig for, then?'

Shaking her head and smiling, Liz sipped her tea. 'You're getting as bad as me.'

'Good. Well then?' Laura smiled, but she couldn't stop the nagging feeling. Liz had looked downcast for a couple of days now.

'You know Joe's retiring at the end of this month, don't you?'

'You already told me that. You're not fretting over it, surely?'

'No. Not over that. It's just that . . .' Liz sat back in her chair and pursed her lips. 'He's not all he's made out to be.'

That came as no surprise. Laura had always known that Joe liked the women, and if Liz hadn't been mourning for Bert when she met him, she would have given her a word of warning. As it was, it seemed best to leave it and hope for the best.

'He's a gold-digger,' Liz said at last. 'Thought I had a packet to come from the insurance policies. Ever since I told him that wasn't the case, he's been a bit standoffish.'

'Just as well you found out when you did.' Laura tried not to let her anger get the better of her for the sake of Liz's pride.

'I thought I'd found a friend. Someone I could talk to, a soul mate. Another person to watch television with. Maybe go to the pictures with, now and then.'

'You can always come round to us, Liz, you know that.'

'You know what's worse? The feeling of being used. I should 'ave known better. I'm no spring chicken.' She pulled her little blue tin out, checked that no one was watching and sprinkled some snuff on the back of her hand.

'I passed him on the stairs this morning; he was charming the woman who comes in to clean the telephones. I wouldn't mind betting she's a widow as well.'

'His type ain't worth upsetting yourself for, Liz.' Laura tried to think of something to lift her. 'I'll tell you what,' she smiled. 'My dad's missed you popping in to see him.'

'Poor old Billy,' Liz laughed. 'Missing someone like me? Must be desperate.'

'Come on, Liz. You don't mean that. You know the pair of you can make each other laugh about nothing.'

'Yeah, that's true. I'll drop in after work. Take him a couple of buns.'

'Good. And try not to think about Joe,' Laura stood up. 'He's a loser, Liz – if only he knew it.'

Walking out of the canteen, Laura stopped in the doorway and looked back at Liz. Telepathy or not, she knew that there was a question on Liz's mind, so she walked slowly back and stood next to her.

'You don't think your dad would wanna move in with me, do you?'

'No chance, Liz. But I know he'd love it if you took his spare room. My old bedroom.'

There was a pause as Liz thought about it. 'It's a smashing little cottage,' she said softly.

'Shut away from the rest of the world behind that old green door in the wall,' Laura persuaded.

'I suppose he does get on with the neighbours?'

'They're all pensioners, Liz. All worked for the brewery. They all know each other. It'd be like hop-picking without the hardships.'

'And you think Billy'd go for that? Me moving around in his little house?'

'Ask him.'

* * *

Laura hadn't seen Jack look so happy in a very long time. Now, in the middle of July, the London dock strike was over and the men were going back to work the next day. While he wasn't that pleased with the outcome it was obvious that he, like hundreds of other men, was sick of just passing the time of day.

Pressing the collar of his shirt, Laura felt a rush of admiration for him. He was giving the blade of his docker's hook a good polish.

'You did well. All of yer. You let this country know the strength of the dockers.'

'Maybe,' Jack said, trying to hide his true feelings. He couldn't wait to get back to the dockside, and she knew it. 'There's gonna be an investigation by a government-sponsored committee next week. At least it's woken 'em up a bit. If we hadn't have agreed to go back, they would have had to move troops in, you know, to move the perishables.' There was a touch of pride in his voice.

'Well, maybe they'll think twice now before they take on outside labour.'

'You can bet your life on it.' Changing the subject, he brought the conversation around to Liz.

'I saw your dad down the waste today. At the fruit and veg stall. Looked happy as a sandboy,

picking out a fresh cauliflower.' Jack chuckled. 'D'yer reckon they'll get married, or what?'

''Course they won't. She's gonna be his lodger and that's all they want.' She hung his shirt on a hanger and checked the cuffs. 'That's all that matters at the end of the day, a bit of company. Someone to say goodnight to.'

'I never did trust that bloke of hers. Taking her to seance meetings. She wouldn't listen, though.'

'No, and neither would you if the boot was on the other foot.'

'Kay's late in,' he said, looking at his watch.

'She's nearly eighteen, Jack, and it's only just gone half past eleven.'

'Half past eleven,' he said, staring out. 'I always had to get you back home by ten.'

'Yeah well, times have changed, thank God. You can do the same thing at midnight as you can before ten. As you well know,' she half smiled.

'I never laid a hand on you till you begged me.'

'Bloody cheek! Me, beg? That'll be the day.'

'Yes you did. With your eyes.' He laid down his sharpening stone. 'Coming to bed?'

Laura pulled the plug out of the socket and stood the iron on the tiled fireplace to cool down. 'I thought you'd never ask.'

'What d'yer think about this gypsy, then?' Jack said.

'Oh, don't keep calling him that, Jack, it's not funny. He's a good kid and she likes him a lot.'

'That's what worries me.'

'He doesn't live in Spain . . .' She had been saving that one.

'That's true,' he said, rubbing his eyes. 'What am I gonna do about this money, Laura?'

'I can't keep up with you. Your mind flashes from one thing to another. What money?'

'The envelopes, for Liz.'

'You should have given them to her by now.'

'I know. I can't bring myself to, though. I suppose I don't want her to have it.' He stood up and stretched. 'Scum money.'

'Oh, shut up. You don't know it's from drugs. You're just guessing. Anyway, you should leave it to Liz to decide. You're not her keeper.'

'Yeah. I s'pose you're right. I'll pop round there after work tomorrow.'

Laura folded the ironing-board and leaned it against the wall. 'I know what I'd do with it.'

He looked at her and waited.

'I'd book a cruise for her and Billy. Tell her you had a good win on the dogs. She won't ask any questions. Neither will Dad.'

'You serious?'

'Yes, Jack, I am. Sod it! Why shouldn't the pair of them see a bit of the world? If that money goes back to the boys it'll just get pissed away.'

'Oy, oy, oy! Language,' Jack scolded.

Laura knew he hated to hear her being coarse, but she knew how to distract him. 'It's true though. You know it is.' She moved close to him and rested her hands on his broad shoulders. 'Where's the harm in it, eh? Try to think of it as unearned income that the taxman won't get his hands on.'

'You mean it, don't yer?'

'Both of them have worked hard all their lives. As hard as any self-made millionaire. So why shouldn't they have a thin slice of what the rich enjoy most of the time?'

'Well,' Jack grinned, 'put like that, what can I say?' He put his strong hands on her small waist, pulled her to him and kissed her with passion.

They would have made love on the rug if the doorbell hadn't brought them down from the heady heights.

'She's forgotten her key again,' Laura couldn't help laughing. 'I'll see her in. You go and warm up the bed.'

Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Laura waited patiently for Kay to stop crying. She knew it was

no use trying to comfort her. She had seen her like this before. She'd stop soon enough.

'What will I *do*?' Kay could hardly speak. 'A whole month! Four weeks.' She buried her head in Laura's shoulder and wailed louder.

Suppressing a smile, Laura tried to see the sad side of it, but it seemed impossible. Zacchi had been commissioned to travel through France and Spain, finding and following Romany travellers, and collecting material for a book about them.

'It'll soon pass, Kay.' Laura could have bitten her tongue. She knew that was the last thing her daughter needed to hear.

'How am I gonna live without him?' Kay looked pleadingly at her out of red, swollen eyes.

Her fingers pressed against her mouth, Laura managed to ask if Kay would like a hot milky drink. Thankfully she did, which gave her a chance to get into the kitchen where she could be alone to let out the pent-up laughter. *My God!* She slowly shook her head. *Did I ever feel like that about anyone?* Then she remembered the feeling of emptiness each year that came when she left Richard in Kent.

Knowing Jack was waiting for her in bed, she suddenly felt guilty for thinking about another man. She wondered if Richard would ever fade from her memory.

'You coming to bed, Laura, or what?' Half asleep, Jack stood in the kitchen doorway.

'Kay's upset. Zacchi's got to go away for a month; they want him to write a book. She's sobbing her heart out in there.'

Jack looked at her blankly. 'A month's not that long, is it?'

'She reckons she won't be able to live without him.' Laura managed to sound serious in case he got annoyed with her for treating it lightly.

'Four weeks?' Jack raised an eyebrow and grinned.

'Jack, don't. If she hears you . . .'

With his hand on his mouth, he practically ran along the passage and into the bedroom where Laura could be sure he would bury his face in his pillow to muffle his laughter.

Pouring the hot milk on to Horlicks in Kay's mug, Laura wondered what she could say to her baby to cheer her up. She remembered the blue box in the sideboard.

Curled up on the sofa, Kay sipped her drink between small, spasmodic sobs. 'Thanks, Mum. This is lovely.'

Sitting next to her, Laura held out a hand and offered Kay the ring box. 'This was your grandfather's, your dad's dad. Aunt Liz won't mind if you have it. It's not that valuable, but it is gold.'

Kay took it and pushed the lid up with her thumb. 'This is a man's ring, Mum.'

'Of course it is. I told yer. It was your grandad's. That stone's an onyx.'

'Why are you giving it to me?'

'So that you can give it to Zacchi.'

A smile lit up her face. 'Are you sure?'

'I've never been surer. While he's wearing that, part of you will be with him.'

As she lay next to Jack in bed, Laura hoped he wouldn't hit the roof when she told him about his dad's ring.

'You asleep?' she whispered in his ear, and then kissed his cheek.

'Give my leg a massage, will yer. It's gone dead.'

Slipping her hand down his thigh, Laura began to giggle. 'You lying sod! You've been lying there thinking about me.'

'No I haven't. I've been dreaming about Sophia Loren.'

Turning over, she switched off the bedside lamp and then climbed out of bed.

'Where are you going?' Jack was suddenly awake.

'Just opening the curtains a bit. I want to see you in the lamplight.'

A deep sigh escaped him as he reached out for her.

'Everything seems to be turning out all right then,' Laura said. 'With our Kay, I mean. Happy in love and happy at work.'

'Yeah, but that don't mean she won't do an about-turn all of a sudden. Little cow. I've never known anyone so unpredictable.'

'No?' Laura slipped in beside him. 'I think she's a chip off the old block.' She kissed him lightly on the mouth.

'Your block – not mine,' he joked, and pulled her on top of him.

At Waterman's, Kay got what she had asked for. Once word was out that she could not only type fast but accurately, the journalists threw handwritten copy at her, and she was forever being asked to help someone out with the dictaphone. She was also bombarded with offers to go to the pub after work.

'So who's the lucky fellow?' John from *Stock Market* handed Kay a vodka and tonic.

'What makes you think there is one?' Kay was flirting with him, but it was expected with this lot.

'You're not interested in any of *us*,' he said with a touch of hope in his smile.

'His name's Zacchi. He's a travel writer.'

'What kind of a name's that?'

'He's a Romany.' Her back stiffened as she shot

him a warning glance, before he started being offensive.

'Tall, dark and handsome?'

'Not quite as tall as you. Probably not as handsome.'

'But?'

'But . . . he's got it.' Kay sipped her drink. 'Whatever *it* is.'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Does any of us?'

John thought about that, then shrugged. 'So where is he tonight, while you're out with all the journos?'

Fed up with being jostled by the pub crowd, Kay looked around for somewhere to sit. 'He's travelling in France.'

'Over there,' John cut in, 'in the corner. Push your way through. I'll follow.'

Once they were settled, John's manner seemed to change. He was more at ease. 'My fiancée's taking our bridesmaids for a fitting,' he said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice.

'You're getting married!' Why Kay should feel so pleased for him she had no idea. They had hardly spoken at work. Polite greetings as he passed on his way in and out of Reception was all that had passed between them, except when he gave her copy to type up.

'You look relieved,' he smiled and drank his beer.

'I suppose I am really. Don't know why, though.'

'You feel safe,' he teased. 'I'm not the lecher you thought I was.'

She had to admit to herself that he was right. They could talk easily now. The guard was down. No need to read into every line. 'How long have you been engaged?'

'Three years. On and off. Five times off.'

'And now you're sure?'

'As much as I'll ever be. What about you, yours serious?'

Kay was impressed that he seemed genuinely interested. 'Very. But it's early days.' She looked into his face. 'Can you tell me something?'

John raised an eyebrow. 'Depends.'

'Why do blokes usually talk to us girls as if you're chatting us up? I don't mean now. Now we're talking normally.'

'We have proof of nothing but our own existence,' he [illegible] in.

'Come again?'

'Ego. Over-concerned about our image,' he said thoughtfully. 'Or . . . scared of coming across as boring?'

'But the chat-up lines and the tone you use, all

the eye contact, that *is* boring. All you can see is the method. The man's hidden.'

'There's your answer. Think about it.' He finished his beer, placed the glass on the table and looked into her bemused face. 'Now then, how about you getting a round?'

Taken aback, she found herself laughing. 'That's the first time a bloke has ever asked me!'

'You're one of us now.'

'Good.' She took that as the best compliment ever paid. 'What's yours?'

'Gin and tonic, please.'

'OK.' Kay looked at the crowded bar. There were a few women, but it was mostly men she'd have to find her way through. 'I don't suppose—'

'You want me to get them in?'

'Would you?' She handed him a ten-shilling note and felt herself blush. 'I'm not used to this.'

Taking the money, he suddenly stroked her face, and withdrew his hand like lightning. 'Sorry.' He jokingly put up both hands as if in surrender.

'It's OK. Don't push it though,' she joked.

While she waited for him to bring the drinks, gazing at the red and gold wallpaper, Kay tried to clarify her feelings. She thought about Zacchi and how much she loved him. She thought about Chris and remembered how she had felt. Now there was

John. She was beginning to like him a lot and felt guilty that she was enjoying his company.

'A penny for them?' He placed their drinks down and handed her the change.

'You really want to know?'

'Can't wait,' he leaned back in his chair.

'Well . . . I was wondering about love.'

'Oh *that*,' he let out a small embarrassed chuckle. 'Not to be confused with sexual attraction.'

'Right. So how do we know when it's the real thing?'

'You shouldn't have to ask. You just know.'

Kay became pensive. Somehow, deep down, she felt he must be right. 'Can two people of the opposite sex have a strong liking for each other without . . .' she shrugged, 'you know.'

'Of course, And so can two people of the same sex.' He offered her a cigarette. 'It's affection.'

'And affection's not love?' She waved away the packet.

'No. It's when all the emotions are going that love ends up on the table.' He leaned forward. 'And we blocked sexual attraction when we spoke about our *betrothed*.' He lit his cigarette. 'Got it?'

'I think so. What you're saying is . . . we can love more than one person, but we only really love the one.'

'At the time,' he broke in. 'I love Pauline – that's her name – and I love my sisters, sometimes. I also love my parents. Some of my colleagues. My friends. And now you.'

Kay looked at him worriedly. If he was so clever, so philosophical about it, why had he singled her out instead of grouping her together with his friends?

'You, my new friend and colleague,' he reassured, reading her thoughts.

'You're such a clever dick,' she laughed.

'No. I had to read up on it. Sort myself out. I'm the one who's getting married, don't forget. I had to be sure. And you know what the bottom line was? The questions I asked myself? Would I want this person to bear my children? Did I want part of me and her to make a whole?' He sipped his drink and sighed. 'That was when I knew. This was for real and for good.'

Wondering why she felt a sudden pang of jealousy, Kay decided it was time for her to leave. She looked at her watch and faked her surprise at the time. 'My mum'll go mad! I said I would be going straight home tonight.'

'Phone her.' John sounded very casual about it. 'Your parents'll have to get used to it. We spend most of our time in the pub. It's part of the job. Where we pick up our little tips.'

Before she had time to decide, Jeannie arrived. 'Hi! What're you two up to?'

'Hallo, how's tricks?' John eyed her slim, shapely body.

'I wouldn't know. I never play them.' She turned to Kay and winked. 'I hope he hasn't been trying to turn your head?'

'If discussing bridesmaids is turning a head, the answer's yes,' he grinned sardonically.

'Oh, well done you,' she said to Kay. 'When they begin to tell you about the domestic, it means you've been initiated. Welcome to the club.' Jeannie pulled up a chair and squeezed it into a tiny gap around the table.

'Of course you'll be treated quite differently now. One of the chaps. Expect lots of jokes and no more real lustful looks.'

'You make us sound undesirable! Mine's a gin and tonic.'

'You know where the bar is.' She pulled a pound note out of her pocket. 'Get one for Kay. Whisky mac for yours truly.'

'You've done well for yourself.' She eased herself forward, allowing just enough room for John to pass. 'It usually takes longer for them to accept you as one of *them*.'

'What kind of jokes should I expect?' Kay was

beginning to like the idea of being part of this new life.

'Oh, all sorts. They'll hide your handbag in the Gents'. Glue your coffee mug to the blotting pad, that sort of thing. Until the next new girl comes along.' She lit a cigarette and kept it dangling from the corner of her mouth while she pulled a tiny face mirror from her handbag.

'Do you enjoy working in Reception, Kay?' she said, checking her reflection.

'They keep me busy. I like that.'

'Well let me know when you've had enough. We need someone to sort us out.'

'I enjoyed the article I typed up for you last week. I didn't realize you were allowed to write about something as serious as that and show the humorous side of it as well.'

'Life and death, love. Get too heavy and you're pulled. And I'm not talking bed.' She took a long draw on her cigarette. 'If you read our mag, you'll see what I mean.'

'I keep meaning to. Don't seem to get the time.'

'Ever thought about scribbling?' Jeannie peered into Kay's face. 'You never know, you might be good.'

'I suppose everyone's had that dream,' Kay shrugged, 'but I'm just a girl from the East End. In

my school the teachers were there more to keep order than to teach. My holes have got a little grammar in them, you might say.'

'Grammar! That's the least of your problems. That, my love, can be taught. Talent cannot.'

'Talking about me again?' John set down a tray of drinks.

'Kay's going to write a feature for *Female Weekly*. What It's Like Living in the East End.'

'Am I?'

'Deadline Wednesday, five o'clock. That gives you the weekend plus three days. No more than a thousand words, double-spaced. Tell us about the wheeling and dealing; the pub life; poverty, and—' she closed her eyes '—Oh, yes,' she smiled, 'the lack of education and rule in schools.'

'OK,' Kay swallowed half her drink, 'you're on. One condition though. You check my spelling on the first draft.'

John roared with laughter. 'She's the worst speller in the whole building. Give it to me, I'll sort it.'

Looking questioningly at Jeannie, Kay was a little surprised to see that she was nodding.

'He's right, the cheeky bastard. And he's probably the best guide you could get. Even though it pains me to say so.'

Within minutes of Jeannie joining them, others

arrived and were duly introduced to Kay. Some she had already seen to say hallo to at work, and others who wrote for other publications. Drinks were offered one after the other, and more than one conversation went on at a time. Most of which went over Kay's head. But she enjoyed it all the same; the buzz was fantastic, and she made up her mind there and then that this was the world for her. She would catch up. She would read up. Soon she would know what they were talking about and understand all the in-house jokes.

Feeling more than light-headed, she made her way to the tube and wondered if her parents would smell the drink on her breath. It was nine-thirty. She thanked her lucky stars that a night in had been the intention, otherwise a very angry Pam*elia* would be waiting for her.

'Hallo, Liz. Did you fetch the haddock?' Billy asked as he closed his front door behind her.

'Yeah. Richard Wood was up the market so I bought it from 'im. Cheaper and a bit fresher. I could do with a cup of tea.'

'I'll put the kettle on. Take the weight off your feet.' He pulled a kitchen chair out from under his green-painted table.

'I don't know,' Liz kicked off her shoes and

relaxed. 'I used to love the sunshine, but give me a light cloudy day any time.'

'Laura's old room don't get a lot of sunshine, you know. Time it gets round to the back of the house it's gone down too far.' He shovelled tea into the aluminium teapot. 'I thought I'd give the walls a coat of primrose to brighten it up a bit. I don't know what you think about this brilliant white that's in. For the paintwork, I mean.'

'Jack said he'd do any decorating for yer, Billy. You don't 'ave to push yourself,' Liz said, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

'It keeps me busy. And how come you're so tired? You 'ad a lie-in today, surely? Your day off?'

'Yeah, I know. But I was up at six all the same. Sorting out my things. Where does it all come from, eh?'

'You were married a long time, Lizzie.' He handed her a cup of tea. 'When's the second-hand dealer meant to be giving you a price?'

'Charlie's coming round at seven.' Sipping her tea, Liz looked over her cup at him. 'You sure we're doing the right thing?'

''Course we are. Makes sense. One set of bills instead of two.'

'Yeah, but, oh, I don't know.' She shook her

head. 'I just 'ope you won't regret it, that's all. You must 'ave got used to having the place to yerself.'

'You can always get used to loneliness, gal. That doesn't mean to say you like it. What time shall I cook the haddock?'

'About one'll do.' Liz looked at the small orange clock on the kitchen dresser. Five past ten. 'That's fast, innit?'

'Yeah. Ten minutes. Don't ask me why I like to keep it that way, I still haven't worked it out. Need anything down the waste?'

Liz thought about it. 'I wouldn't mind treating myself to a new dressing gown. I wonder if that knock-down stall's out this week?'

'Bound to be. We'll go once we've drunk this. Wanna biscuit?'

'No. I had a big bowl of porridge this morning. I'm still in the habit of making enough for two.' She lowered her eyes, appreciating the silence. That was the good thing about her and Billy. They had known each other long enough to realize when to keep quiet.

'How about a nice lemon housecoat? To go with your new bedroom,' Billy grinned as he pulled on his cap.

'No. I fancy a pale blue candlewick,' said Liz with

conviction as she pulled the old gate shut behind them. 'If not pale blue, then rose pink.'

'It's your money,' he said, striding along Cleveland Way, swinging his arms.

'Slow down, Billy, for Gawd's sake.' Liz had been trying to keep up with him. 'I'm nearly out of breath already. And my throat's dry.'

'I'll treat you to a nice cold sarsaparilla from Becky's sweet shop.'

Liz stopped in her tracks. 'If you don't slow down, I'm going back! I mean it, Billy,' she said, shaking her head at him. 'You're gonna have to get out of that habit of walking fast when you're out with me.'

'All right, gal,' he said, waiting for her. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist. I was rushing to get this bet on, that's all.'

'Oh, right. Go on then, I'll catch you up. I don't want you to miss it. Expect you've been studying form since five this morning.'

'Paper didn't come till half past six. Shall I put one on for you?' he called back over his shoulder.

'Yeah, go on then. A dollar to win on whatever you've picked!'

'A dollar? Bit steep, innit?' He stood on the pavement, pushed his cap back and rubbed his chin. 'If you're gonna spend that much, why not go for a treble?'

'All right. You sort 'em out. But a treble win! I don't wanna place-bet. Not worth it.'

Laughing quietly to himself, Billy walked on, a bit slower. Liz knew he was giving himself time to think about this morning's study, remembering which horses were in good form.

Arriving outside the betting shop, she perched herself on the low window-sill and was content to watch the Saturday shoppers go by. Facing Hammond's side entrance, she was pleased not to be in there working. Monday would come around soon enough.

'Hallo, Liz.' Milly's cheery voice broke into her thoughts. 'I'm just going in to see Laura. I know she finishes at twelve, so I mustn't stop.'

Liz blinked twice as she turned to face her friend whom she hadn't seen in ages. 'Talk about a face from the past,' she chuckled.

'I always go down the waste on a Saturday, Liz. It's you who's out of your territory. Bethnal Green market going downhill, is it?'

'No, I'm just waiting for Billy. Laura's dad. He's in there,' she tilted her head towards the door. 'How's tricks then? Georgie's leg still playing him up?'

'No. Did him the world of good, that little stretch inside. He's a changed man. They knocked the loafer out of him, I'll tell yer.' She looked and sounded

happier than Liz had ever seen her. 'I miss 'oppin', though, don't you?'

Realizing that Milly couldn't have heard her bad news, Liz braced herself. 'My Bert passed away you know,' she said quietly.

'Oh, Liz. Surely not? Not Bert?' Her eyes filled up in seconds.

'Yeah,' Liz sighed. 'It was a bit of a shock. Heart. Died in his sleep, more or less . . . you know.' Liz swallowed hard.

'I'm sorry, love.' Milly shook her head. 'When I think of the bastards who are walking about and shouldn't be.'

'Do you ever see Mrs Brown?' Liz was quick to change the subject. She hardly needed reminding that Bert should still be by her side.

'Yeah, poor cow. Walks about as if she's in another world. He left her in the end you know. Gawd knows where to. Still, she's better off I suppose. At least she's not covered in bruises any more. Can't be easy though, bringing up four kids on her own.'

'So why you going in to see my Laura, then? Gonna treat yourself to a nice new frock?'

'As it 'appens. My Brianny's getting married, can you believe? We've booked the room above the Artichoke. Got a band and everything. Her family's

from Tonbridge. Little bit on the posh side, so I wanna make a good impression, see?'

''Course you do, Milly, and why not?'

Checking the narrow road for traffic, Milly looked back. 'Why don't you and Laura come for half hour? It'll be like old times.'

'What about Jack? He's still around, you know,' Liz smiled.

'Yeah, 'course, I just thought you might feel . . . oh, I dunno.'

'I'll bring Billy with me if that makes you feel better.'

'Do that.' She stepped out into the road. 'Billy, eh? Didn't take you long, did it,' she teased.

Liz smiled but inside she hurt. The remark cut deep. But then she would have to contend with more of that in the future, especially once she had moved into his cottage. But she could cope with it. She knew why she and Billy needed to share the same roof. Loneliness could turn a good day into a nightmare, and there were lots of days ahead of them both. God willing.

'Our Kay seems to be all right now,' Billy said as he and Liz strolled along the waste.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Liz was sharp enough to realize he might be trying to tell her something.

'I was a bit concerned. When she came back from that Spanish holiday of hers, she looked drawn in the face, as if she had something on her mind.'

'She fell in love, Billy. What d'yer expect?'

'That's what worried me.'

'In case her lover-boy had been dipping his lolly in the sherbet, you mean?'

'Something like that, yeah,' he laughed. 'You can be crude at times, Liz, you know that?'

'It's honesty in my book. Anyway, she's all right. Not in the club, if that's what's worrying yer.'

'You know that, do you?'

'Yes, Billy. I do.'

'That's all right then. All we have to hope is that she behaves herself with that gypsy.' He nodded towards the delicatessen. 'I just wanna pop in and get a couple of Barron's New Green cucumbers to go with our fried fish.'

Waiting outside for him, enjoying the sun on her face, Liz spotted Kay's best friend Pamela walking towards her. She was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'What you looking so pleased about?' Liz said.

'My boyfriend's coming over from Spain, for a holiday. Next week. Don't tell Kay though, I want it to be a surprise. I want to watch her face when we all turn up on her doorstep.'

'All?'

'Charles, that's my young man's name, and Chris . . . Kay's friend.'

'Let's hope Zacchi doesn't get jealous.'

'Zacchi won't be here though, will he? He'll be out of the country while Chris's in it. Perfect timing.'

'So long as it's not two-timing.' Liz was feeling rattled at Pamela's attitude.

Shrugging, Pamela made to step into her parents' delicatessen. 'Why are you standing out here anyway?'

Liz nodded towards Billy who was paying for his pickled cucumbers. 'Kay's grandfather's doing a bit of shopping.'

Pamela looked thoughtful. 'You're gonna move into his spare room, aren't you? Never too old, eh?' she smiled, leaving Liz open-mouthed.

Feeling her anger rising, Liz inhaled slowly. Had Pamela not slipped out of her hands so quickly, she would have given her a piece of her mind about showing respect to her elders. One thing was becoming very clear: Liz was going to have to accept the fact that people jumped to the obvious conclusions about her and Billy.

'Come on,' Liz walked ahead as her friend joined her. 'I fancy a walk around the art gallery.'

'You what?' Billy shoved the well-wrapped pickles into his jacket pocket.

'The Whitechapel art gallery. It's cool, peaceful and there are nice pictures to look at.'

'Fair enough,' he took her by the hand and led her through the doors. 'This feels a bit like courting to me,' he smiled.

'Don't start that, Billy. We're friends. Don't spoil it.'

'It was a joke, Liz. I'm too old for all that.'

'You reckon?' Liz threw him a mischievous look. 'I wouldn't bank on it.'

Instead of making her way towards her and Pamela's favourite coffee bar, Kay found herself walking along Bethnal Green, heading for the second-hand office equipment shop. She had decided to borrow ten pounds from the envelope to buy herself a typewriter.

Sitting down at the desk, she tried out the used Underwood machine. It took her back to her school days and the commerce course. It was identical to the one on which she had learned to type. She remembered her teacher fighting to have proper desks and typewriters brought in.

'You won't find anything cheaper in that condition.' The owner of the small office equipment shop ran his hand through a thick mop of frizzy, light brown hair. 'And since you're such a pretty

face, I'll throw in a spare ribbon.' He crossed his thick, heavily freckled arms and cupped his reddish beard, giving her a fatherly wink.

'Done,' Kay smiled shyly. She felt like yelling for joy. Her own typewriter! Now she could tuck herself away in her room and write whenever she felt like it.

'Gonna write a book, are yer?' he smiled.

'Who knows?' She swept her hand across the keys. 'I always wanted to, when I was little. I begged my dad to buy me a John Bull printing set. He got me a little printing gadget instead. He thought it would be better because it was more up to date.' She looked back at the shop owner, 'I needed a hand-held printing set.'

'The ones with rubber letters all in a row?'

'And you cut them up and used tweezers to space them into the words you wanted to make up and print.'

'Be a lot quicker with this.' He tapped out *I am a writer!* 'Never forget that, and you'll soon 'ave other people believing it.'

Kay felt a tingling in her fingertips. 'I wish it was true.'

'It is true. It's written all over you.' He pointed a friendly finger in her face. 'It's up to you. There's no law to stop you. And every day has twenty-four hours.'

'You sound as if you know something about it.' Kay was warming to him by the second.

'There are three novels gathering dust on my shelf. A collection of my poems and a few short stories. One day I'll send something off to a publisher,' he said, obviously embarrassed.

'Can I read one of the novels?' Kay asked.

'No one ever gets to see the rubbish I write.' There was an underlying tone of disappointment in his blunt voice.

'OK, but what if I do manage to type a book?'

'*Write* a book,' he corrected.

'OK, write a book. We could swap and read each other's. I'll promise to tell you honestly if I think it's good or not – if you'll do the same for mine.'

'How to lose a friend!' he laughed.

'I've never met anyone who's actually written a novel. I work with journalists, but three novels, poetry, short stories! You must be good.'

'Well, I think I am, but . . .' he shrugged and spread his hands. 'Tell you what, come back next Saturday and I'll have sorted out a short story for you to take away and read. So long as you don't nick my ideas.'

'That'd be great. A good excuse to come back in here as well.' She spun herself around on the typist's chair. 'I love the smell of oil and ink and

metal, and all these different typewriters. Some look as if they've come out of the ark.'

'They'll be worth a lot of money in the future. Collector's pieces.'

'You reckon?' Kay shook her head and laughed at him. 'I doubt it.'

Proudly carrying her typewriter in its case, Kay walked into the living room to find Laura and Jack sitting quietly with their heads lowered. There was a heavy atmosphere in the room.

'You'd best sit down, Kay,' Laura murmured. 'There's something your dad wants to talk to you about.' She gave Jack a nudge with her foot to urge him.

Folding the letter which had brought the news, Jack leaned back in his armchair and sighed. 'Take the weight off your feet then,' he smiled sheepishly at her, wondering how she would react to his thunderbolt.

Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Kay looked from her dad to her mum and back to her dad again. 'What's happened now?'

'It's more a case of what happened nearly three years ago.'

Jack took his tobacco tin from his cardigan pocket. 'I know it didn't escape your notice that Mum and me went through a bad patch.'

'It could hardly escape my notice, Dad. It went on for years before it all came to a head.' She didn't want those memories to come flooding back. 'I thought that was all in the past. Dead and buried?'

'It is, babe. As far as your mum and me are concerned. We've never been as happy together as we are now.' His voice trailed off.

'So what, then?' She knew it was serious from his face.

'Well . . .' Jack was finding it difficult to choose the right words. 'I was—' he shook his head, 'I've been a silly boy.'

'You're not a boy, Dad!'

'No. OK. Fair enough. When your mum and me were sleeping in separate rooms there was a reason for it. I was full of guilt, OK? I was having an affair with someone called—'

'I don't want to know her name!' Kay clenched her fists, forcing herself not to get emotional. 'I knew about her at the time, so it's not news now! And you know that, so what's different?'

'You've got a half-brother.'

It didn't go in, not at first. Kay deliberately blocked it. She felt a sudden surge of hate for her father. Hate and disgust. 'I'm going to my room,' she stood up, not looking at either of them.

'Sit down!' Jack ordered. 'Sit down and listen!

And stop acting the madam!' His face was red and the veins on his neck stood out as if ready to burst.

'I'm not acting! I hate you!' she screamed. 'You make me feel sick. Dirty! I wish I had nothing to do with you!'

'That's enough, Kay!' Laura yelled. 'You high-and-mighty little cow. Do as your dad says and sit back down *now*!'

Reluctantly, Kay threw herself on to the sofa, crossed her arms and legs and glared at Jack. 'I'm listening!'

'Your brother's—'

'I haven't got a brother!'

'Your brother is two and a half years old.' Jack spoke slowly, emphasizing each word, daring her not to deny him. 'And he's a dead ringer for you.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better, is it?'

'I'm not asking you to feel anything, Kay. I know this has come as a shock.'

'You should have told me before now.' She stood up and paced the floor. 'How dare you not tell me I've got a brother? What right have you to keep that from me?' Kay felt as if she were going to explode. She couldn't believe how insensitive they could be.

'Sit *down*, Kay,' Laura pleaded. She was finding

it difficult too. 'Your dad's really upset about this letter he got today.'

'I'm not gonna sit down.' She breathed hard. 'What letter?'

'It's from the child's mother.' Jack carefully avoided calling Patsy by her name. He knew exactly why Kay didn't want to hear it.

'She's getting married, and her boyfriend refuses to take on someone else's—' Jack swallowed hard, looking at the letter in his hand, 'bastard,' he murmured, heavy with guilt.

'Bloody cheek. How dare any one say that about an innocent two-year-old?'

'The thing is, little Jac—'

'Little *who*? You named him after you?' Now she did feel the effect of the shock. It struck instantly. As if someone had tapped the top of her head with a wand and said *Freeze!*

'There's a little boy,' she spoke in a monotone, not moving, not looking, staring ahead, 'who looks like me. My brother. I have a brother. And his name is the same as my dad's. You've been loving him all this time.' The tears were warm as they rolled down her cheeks, cold by the time they reached her neck.

'But I had to be kept out of it. You didn't want me to see my brother?' She looked at Jack, appealing. 'Why did you do that? Why have you kept us apart?

You must love him a lot. You called him Jack. You named him after you. You didn't name me after Mum.' She could hardly focus through her tears.

'*She* called him that, not me!' Jack clenched his teeth. 'And now she's dumped him in a *home*.' Covering his face, Jack began to cry.

Kay had never seen her dad like this before. Loud wailing sounds were coming from him. His body was shaking, almost going into convulsions. Then she remembered coming round after the drowning accident in Kent. She had heard him crying then. It was the same desperate sobbing.

'They've put the poor little sod out, Kay,' he looked up at her, 'dumped him. She's got 'er way in the end. She wanted to get rid of him from the start.' He felt a sharp kick from Laura, and could have bit his tongue.

'No!'

Laura found her voice again. 'A small children's home in Leicester.'

'How could she do a thing like that?'

'She's not all bad. Poor cow probably had no choice. He must have given her an ultimatum. And when you love someone . . .'

'So you want to know how I feel about you taking him?' Kay said.

'No.' Jack shook his head. 'She's made it very

clear that she wants him kept in the neighbourhood so that she and the grandparents can visit him at weekends.' He mopped his face with his handkerchief and made an effort to compose himself.

'She wants to have her cake and eat it. Well, we're not just gonna leave it like that, are we?' Kay looked from one parent to the other.

'We'll try applying to the authorities to foster him but it'll take ages, and there's not much of a chance that we'll get him. Mostly because of us living out of the area.'

'So while we've got a home to offer, a loving family, a room of his own, he has to stay in a home?' Kay raised her eyebrows. 'They need their brains tested if they think we're gonna put up with that.'

'It'll take months, years of fighting and meanwhile, that little kid finds himself in a strange place full of people he doesn't know.' Jack's eyes were blazing. 'It beats me how anyone can do that!'

'Especially to a little darling like Jac,' Laura hung her head.

'You've been seeing him too?' Another blow for Kay.

'Only the once. I found a letter in your dad's jacket pocket. I went to Leicester to punch her in the face, but when I got there . . . saw that little tot in his play-pen . . .' Laura found she could barely speak.

'And he is the image of you, Kay. I could hardly believe it.'

'Right,' Kay said, her voice full of determination. 'You two are obviously too upset to do anything, so I suppose it's up to me. I'll get him out.'

'You can't do that,' Jack smiled at her through his tears. 'The law's an ass and all that, but try fighting it.'

'I don't give a *fuck* about the law any more! I've had it up to here with the law and its double standards!'

'Oh, Kay, please don't swear. Don't get bitter,' Laura pleaded.

But Kay could not be stopped. 'Sometimes we have to ignore what's written as wrong – when we know it's right. And that's just what I intend to do.'

Jack frowned at her. 'What's on your mind, babe?'

'You'll see.' She left the room, slamming the door behind her.

'D'yer think Kay took it to heart, you know, when I talked about Patsy wanting to get rid of—'

'Oh, shut up, Jack. She's put it out of her mind – why can't you do the same?'

Jack leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. 'Because I'm still gutted over it, that's why. I know what I'd like to do to that Spaniard.'

'And I thought you were ready to forgive and forget. Silly me!'

'I'll never forget. Never. Just let him show his face, that's all!'

Chapter Thirteen

Standing in the doorway of *Female Weekly*, Kay saw before her yet another new and exciting world. The sound of electric typewriters clacking busily, the whirr of the photocopying machine and the conversation of people in the office and on the telephone conducting interviews sent a thrill of possibility to Kay's core. She caught sight of Jeannie across the room and cautiously wove her way around workers and desks to join her.

'I suppose you're too busy to talk to me?' Kay said, worried she might be disturbing her train of thought.

Switching off her machine, Jeannie leaned back in her chair and smiled. 'Don't tell me you've finished the article already?'

'No. I haven't even started it.'

Her superior's expression changed instantly. Without uttering a word, she was asking Kay what, in that case, was she doing there.

'Can I sit down?'

Looking at her watch, she narrowed her eyes. 'Five minutes. I'm running late.'

Pulling the chair close so no one would hear, Kay leaned forward. 'I've given it a lot of thought over the weekend, and I honestly don't think that writing about life in the East End will make good copy. We're not that much different from anyone else.'

'Have you spent time in other parts of London, seeing the way other people go through their days?'

'No. And that's another thing. I've got nothing to compare our way of life with.'

'That's the point.' Jeannie examined her fingernails and shrugged. 'Oh well, it was just an idea.'

'I do have another one,' said Kay quickly, before Jeannie's forefinger hit the on switch of the typewriter.

'Go on. But be brief,' she warned.

'I've read a couple of the magazines now, so I've got more of an idea of the house style. The kind of stories you—'

'You're waffling,' she said, in a singsong voice.

'OK. I want to write an article about a seventeen-year-old who suddenly discovers she's got a brother, and what it feels like to know that he's in a children's home.'

Jeannie reached for a packet of cigarettes, a look of interest on her face. 'You?'

'Yeah. I only just found out.'

'And you're prepared to give us the story?'

'I don't see why not. My name won't go in, will it?'

'Not if you don't want it to. We can change all the names. But it's the only way to get yourself known as a feature writer.'

'That's not why I'm doing it. Maybe the next article, but not this one.' Kay could hardly believe herself. She sounded positive: any self-consciousness had gone.

'Why do you want to do it?'

Kay took a deep breath. She was beginning to feel slightly emotional. 'If I can let other parents know the harm they're doing when they make such decisions—'

'Your parents put him in there?'

'No, I mean – *his* parents. His mother.' Kay rolled her eyes. 'He's my father's illegitimate son.'

'Ah.'

'The other woman's getting married and her bloke won't take on someone else's son. Mum and Dad want to adopt him, but she wants him in a home in Leicester near her, so she can visit him.' Kay eyed Jeannie's packet of cigarettes.

'Help yourself.'

'Thanks. I'm going to do something about it. But that'll be the next instalment.'

'Fine.' Jeannie pushed against the desk with her foot and spun around slowly in her swivel chair. 'And what exactly had you in mind?'

'I'm going to Leicester. Get him out of that home and bring him back.'

Slowly shaking her head, Jeannie made it very clear that it was a bad idea. 'The law takes a dim view of kidnapping.'

Determined not to be swayed, Kay avoided making eye contact. 'I've got a couple of uncles who I think will help. They can drive me there, wait while I go in, then drive us both back to Stepney.'

'You've been reading too many bad paperbacks,' she said, not mincing her words.

Angrily Kay stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. She hadn't meant to disclose her plan, and was annoyed with herself.

Too late to retract it, she could only hope that the editor would dismiss it. 'I'll just write up the bit about my finding out about him, then.'

'I'm not interested.' She switched on her machine and began to type.

'Why not? You were at first.'

'Yep. It sounded good. Our readers would have loved it.'

'So?'

'I don't want one of our writers getting mixed up

in what you have in mind. We can do without that kind of publicity, thank you.' She looked up at Kay. 'A member of *Female Weekly* going to prison?'

'Don't be daft. Prison?' Kay smiled nervously. That word had been bandied about too much of late.

'Listen. Don't even think about it. Drive it out of that silly head of yours. Go for plans B or C.'

Kay looked at her, puzzled. She hadn't mentioned any other plans – she didn't *have* any other plans. Jeannie was half smiling, waiting for the penny to drop.

'You mean I should have thought of other ways?'

An impatient sigh escaped her. 'Something like that, yes.'

Kay shrugged forlornly. 'I couldn't think of any other way. I've gone over it so many times.'

'Look. Write your article and meanwhile, I'll give it some thought. Legal thought.'

'Fighting for an adoption could take *years*!' Kay knew she was out of order talking to her senior like that, but something inside was beginning to snap. 'And meanwhile that poor little two-year-old is with strangers! It's my baby brother we're talking about—' Her voice cracked and she had to turn away.

A comforting, feeling arm went around her shoulder.

'We'll think of something, Kay, don't upset yourself. She can't be made of stone, his mother. And if she is, we could always wield the threat of the power of the pen.'

'You mean you'd write to her?'

'No, silly! I'll see if I can set up a meeting. Don't worry, I'll be gentle. I'm a good journo. I know how to handle people. Especially women. She'll see us, I promise you.'

'I'd got it all planned out, as well. I was gonna rush in and carry him off.'

'And scare the bloody life out of the poor kid?'

Kay suddenly felt foolish. 'Doesn't know me from Adam, does he? It was a pretty dumb idea.'

'No it wasn't. It was a lovely, thoughtful gesture. And when I tell my fiancé about it, he'll want to marry you instead of me.'

'Oh no, please don't tell anyone!' Kay felt her world changing again, slipping out of her control.

'We'll need him,' Jeannie said, lowering her voice. 'He'll find all the ins and outs for us. He's an investigative journalist and a bloody good one.'

Turning back to her work, she added brightly, 'Welcome to our inner circle. The one outside work and pub sessions. Join us for dinner tomorrow night, OK?'

Kay nodded and retreated, believing she had found another friend.

'And get the article in on time!' she called out as Kay was leaving the office.

'What was all that about?' asked a tall, thin woman draped in layers of mauve and black. 'You're not getting her to write about life as a docker's daughter, are you?' she smiled sarcastically.

'The kid's just discovering she's a writer. I don't suppose you can remember what that felt like?' Jeannie said, putting the seasoned journalist in her place. 'Too long ago, I would have thought.'

Drawing on a long ebony cigarette-holder, the woman blew a smoke ring into the air. 'She can hardly string a sentence together, let alone write a decent feature.'

'You think so? We'll see.' She began to type again. 'She might end up Chief Editor – before she goes on to other things.'

Surprised and pleased with Kay's first feature article, Jeannie decided to hold it back until a sound plan had been worked out regarding the meeting with Patsy.

'I won't alter your story, Kay. Just turn a few sentences around for the sake of grammar. Once you've seen what I've done, you'll know for the next time. I have a feeling you're a quick learner.'

'What about my spelling?' Kay whispered. She didn't want any staff passing through Reception to overhear.

'John went through it for me. I'm afraid even your spelling mistakes had spelling mistakes.'

'Oh God, how *embarrassing*.' Kay suddenly wished she had never had ideas above her station.

'Don't be silly! You're a good writer. Spelling comes once you've learned a few of the rules. Take a dictionary to bed instead of a paperback. I did. It worked wonders.' She winked at Kay and left her to go back to the *Female Weekly* office.

You're a good writer . . . The words drifted through Kay's mind, once, twice, three times. She couldn't stop smiling as the bearded face of the man in the office equipment shop came into her thoughts. Remembering the line he'd typed on her machine she clenched her fists and yelled, *'Yes!'*

Now that she had handed in her article she felt a sense of loss. Nothing else for it, she told herself, I'll just have to make a start on that novel. She leaned back in her chair and began planning. It would be a psychological thriller about a woman betrayed. She would wander the streets at night tracking down men who were out looking for women instead of at home with their wives and children.

Her heroine wouldn't kill the men, she would just terrorize them; maybe cut off a lock of their hair as a warning. A warning that should she catch them out again, she would hack off all their hair. *The Woman in Black* is what she would call her first novel. Or better still, *The Woman Who Terrifies . . .*

'Couldn't type up this copy for me, could you, Kay?' John's voice brought her back to earth. 'Dreaming about that gypsy of yours again?' he teased.

Feeling herself blush, she told him how clever he was, reading her thoughts like that.

'Pop it on my desk when you've done. You up for a drink after work?'

'No, not tonight. Apparently Pamela's arranged some kind of a surprise date.' She lifted her nose.

'Two-timing, eh?'

'What if I was?'

'Enjoy it while you may,' he grinned. 'If you fancy 'em, bed 'em, that's what I say.'

Kay tried not to look shocked. 'You don't mean that?'

'Of course I do.' He was very matter-of-fact.

'You mean, if you met a girl, say, in the pub tonight, and she and you – well, you know – sparks flying and all that.'

'Yes,' he grinned, cutting in.

'But you're already getting married?'

'So?'

'You *can't* love two people at once.'

'Who said anything about that? I don't have to fall for every girl I fancy.' He perched himself on the corner of her desk. 'I'm not in love with you, am I?'

'Don't be stupid.'

'Well, there you are then. I fancied you rotten at first. Then I found I really liked you. But that's all. It stops there.' He pushed his face up close to hers. 'You don't have to love those you like a lot. You can have friends of the opposite sex. It's not against the law.' He stood up, shook his head and walked away chuckling.

Hating him for being so cocksure, she secretly stuck two fingers up to him. He certainly had a way of making her think. She had always believed that if you began to like a boy you stayed with him until you fell in love. If you didn't fall in love, you said goodbye. But now she was seeing things in another light. Each friend, male or female, was just part of her world. Different mates for different reasons. Love was something else.

She looked down at the copy John had left her. He had scribbled across the top in red pen *To*

be typed by the sexiest girl in the whole bloody building. And for some reason she felt flattered instead of affronted. He hadn't meant anything by it other than a bit of fun. It dawned on her that she had been taking life, and people, far too seriously.

Feeding a sheet of paper into her typewriter, she tried to guess what the surprise date was that Pamela had lined up. Probably Tommy and Micky were going to take them to the Prospect of Whitby at last. She had begged them enough times in the past to change their regular pub-crawl and enjoy a drink overlooking the Thames.

'But my twin-tub does boil up the whites, Billy! And it's a lot less trouble than that old boiler.' Having lost over the refrigerator, Liz was determined to have her way and install her washing-machine into his old-fashioned kitchen.

'That's as may be, Liz. But I'm used to that copper. And anyway we can hardly get it carted away. It'd cost a bomb to move it.'

'We won't need to. We can plant some lovely indoor bulbs. My machine'll go over there, in that corner, near the butler sink.'

'Indoor bulbs?' His blue eyes twinkled at the thought of it.

'Yeah. One of my friends did it when she modernized. It looks lovely. Brightens up her old scullery, I can tell yer.' She was winning him over and knew it.

'Now then, what about getting rid of this old gas stove?'

'But there's nothing wrong with it. Clean as a whistle, and does my Sunday joint a treat.'

'Yeah, but mine's electric,' Liz said proudly.

'I'm not having electric and that's definite!' Billy marched out of the scullery. 'You can fetch your washing-machine in, but that's all!'

Looking out of the window on to his tiny back garden, Liz suddenly felt very happy. It was full of lupins, Canterbury bells and roses. Her eyes went from the rich black earth to the old brick wall that was covered in purple clematis.

'If you wanna make yourself at home, you could put the kettle on the gas stove,' Billy called from the living room. 'Matches are on the shelf above it. Cups are in the dresser!'

Liz couldn't help smiling. This was a breakthrough. So far he had always insisted that he made the tea. She couldn't think why. 'Two sugars?'

'Two and half!' he corrected, yelling above the sound of the television he had just switched on. 'The six o'clock news'll be on in a minute, if you wanna see it!'

'I do, Billy, yeah. You gonna 'ave a piece of this angel cake?'

'No, ta, I'm not keen. A couple of digestives'll do me!'

Pouring boiling water into the teapot, Liz began to feel more and more at home. Waiting for the tea to brew, she became pensive. Moving in with Billy felt right. And she knew that Bert would be chuffed to bits if he could see her. She felt sad that that night would be the last she would spend in her own two-up, two-down. Tomorrow was the official moving-in day. Jack had borrowed a van from a friend and was going to bring her bits and pieces over during Saturday. Most of the larger pieces had been sold off to the second-hand dealer.

'Do you play cards, Billy?' Liz asked, handing him his tea.

'Haven't done for years.' He sat back and thought about it. 'Three card brag. Pontoon. Rummy. Three of One and Four of the Other, as young Kay used to call it.' He dipped his biscuit into his tea. 'I dunno, Liz, you keep bringing memories back,' he chuckled.

'Only there's a couple of friends of mine who like to play. Perhaps we could invite them over one night in the week, for a game?' Liz knew it was rather early on to suggest changing his routine, but she felt it best

to start as she meant to go on. Billy was set in his ways and he could be a bit on the stubborn side.

'Could do, yeah. Leave it a for a couple of weeks though, eh? Till I get used to having you around the place.'

'Yeah, all right.' Liz smiled inwardly. At least he was willing to try.

'We'll 'ave to sort out the finances, Liz. I don't want anything for the rent but perhaps you could chuck a little bit in for groceries. What d'yer reckon?'

'I'll pay half the rent, half the electric, half the gas. And half for the shopping. You can buy your own tobacco and I'll pay for my own sweets. I always keep a tin of Quality Street in the cupboard and I buy a half-pound of chocolate off the stall on Saturdays. Other than that, I don't need much else.'

'You're not paying my rent,' he said, insistent.

'Yes I am.'

'Oh, no.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I said no, Liz!'

'And I said yes, Billy!'

Shifting about in his chair, Billy shook his head. 'Jack warned me you were obstinate,' he murmured.

'Good. That's settled then.' She sat back in the armchair and focused on the television. 'That's a

good picture, Billy, much better than mine.' She knew how to get round him.

'I get it serviced regularly so it'll always go. Bit like my bowels. A dose of Epsom salts every night to keep myself open,' he grinned.

Liz found that amusing. She had never heard anyone compare themselves to a television set before.

Feeling relaxed, she lay back and let the six o'clock news go over her head, while her mind filled with her son, his wife and their lack of interest in having children. Liz longed for a grandchild and at sixty, she reckoned she was entitled to one. If David didn't get a move on, his wife would soon be past safe child-bearing age.

'What d'yer reckon about Kay and this Zacchi, then, Billy? Fancy gypsies for in-laws, do you?'

'Don't bother me, so long as she's happy. He seems nice enough. Clean. Very clean. Gets a good shine on his shoes as well. That says a lot. Why, you're not prejudiced, are yer?'

'Hardly. If the truth be known, there's gypsy in our family line, and not all that far back neither. No. It'll be strange seeing Gypsy Rose again. I expect we'll meet up now. She always said we would.' Liz smiled and drifted off into a light sleep as sunny hop-picking days came flooding back. Anyone looking into that small living room could be forgiven for thinking that

seventy-year-old Billy and his new lodger, Liz, had been living there together for decades. All that was missing was a cat curled up at their feet. Liz would soon see to that though. Her fifteen-year-old mog, Blackie, would be moving in with her the next day.

'Kay'll give you a hand with your packing if you ask her,' Billy said.

'I wouldn't dream of it. My niece 'as got 'er own life to get on with. She's gonna be a writer, you know.'

'Oh yeah?' It made Billy feel uncomfortable, Liz talking about his granddaughter as if she were as close to Kay as he was. 'What makes you say that?'

'Don't know. Just feel it in my bones, that's all.'

'Let's 'ope you're right. She can look after us in our old age.'

Liz liked that. At last Billy had stopped thinking of himself as slipping into the grave. There was life in the old boy yet.

While Liz and Billy were fantasizing about Kay, she was on her way to the date Pamela had set up for them. Strolling along with all the time in the world, she enjoyed the warmth of the late sun as it began to go down. It had been a flaming hot day and the tar on the narrow road felt soft underfoot as she crossed

from one side of Brady Street to the other. Pamela had insisted she meet her outside the Whitechapel art gallery on the dot of eight.

Kay passed a young woman who was studying a tricycle in a toy shop window, while wiping some ice-cream from the chin of her small child in a pushchair, and it made her wonder what her brother looked like. She had been thinking about him on and off since she discovered that she wasn't an only child. She had begun to miss him. Miss the little boy she had never met! It seemed silly to her but she just couldn't help what she was feeling inside; a feeling of loss. She had a brother, and she wanted to hold him. She wanted that more than anything else in the world.

As much as Kay realized that her original idea of walking into the children's home and carrying Jac off had been a reckless one, she couldn't quite get it out of her mind. Jeannie had been right to suggest they handle it her way. Kay felt sure of that but even so, she was anxious to do something, and soon. She couldn't help worrying that little Jac might be very unhappy at being dumped in a strange place with strange people.

In no real mood for fun, Kay approached the art gallery wishing she had never agreed on the rendezvous. She missed Zacchi and would rather

have been at home in her room, typing the short story she had begun to write. At the moment she much preferred to be in a world of her own creation than the real one.

'Fifteen minutes late!' Pamela looked angry and nervous.

'So?' Kay was beginning to wonder about the surprise her friend had in store. 'Where's the fire?'

'In here,' a familiar voice spoke from behind her.

Spinning around, Kay came face to face with Chris's smile. He had his hand on his heart. 'I just couldn't put out the flame.'

Arm in arm with Charles, who had also stepped out from the shadows, Pamela was laughing. 'Look at her face! Anyone'd think she'd seen a ghost! A very tanned ghost.'

'You should have told me,' Kay snapped at her friend. 'You're not clever!'

'Someone doesn't seem very pleased to see me,' Chris dropped his head to one side and looked into her face. 'Maybe I shouldn't have flown all this way? Maybe you should have written Return to Sender on my letters?' There was a touch of anger in his voice. 'Instead of making up stories about your dad holding them back!'

'It was true! And where's your fiancée? Being fitted up for her wedding dress?'

'You really did fall for that one?' He took Kay by the arm and led her away. 'We'll meet you in the Beggar's in half an hour,' he called back to Pamela and Charles.

'If you were lying then you could be lying now!' Kay caught a whiff of the familiar aftershave he wore and felt her heart beat more rapidly.

'Maybe you haven't experienced hurt pride? You do anything to hide it. Anything. Until time helps to dull the pain.' He looked away, pretending to be interested in dogs fighting across the busy Whitechapel Road.

'I wasn't lying, Chris. My dad really did keep the letters from me. He thought I might go rushing off to Spain to live.'

'What's so terrible about that?'

'I'm an only child.' She felt her heart sink as she said the words but it wasn't the right time to go into all of that. Nevertheless, the two-year-old flooded back into her thoughts no matter how hard she tried not to think about him. Then the other loss filled her mind. Chris's baby.

'You're really upset.' He squeezed her hand. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lied about loving someone else.' He flashed a smile. 'To tell the truth, I've never had to do the chasing before.'

'No, I can understand that.' She gave in and

smiled at him. 'You're too bloody attractive for your own good.'

'And you're not?'

'I don't know what I am. I've never really thought about it. I think more about what I feel than what I look like. And if beauty's judged on that, I'm very dull.'

'You don't mean that, so why say it?' A frown replaced his smile.

'No, I don't mean that, you're right. But I did up until recently.'

'What happened to change it?' He pushed open the door of the Blind Beggar.

'Quite a lot actually. I was kind of pushed into leaving one job and starting another. It was the best thing that's ever happened to me, as it turned out.' Her mind was still full of the miscarriage. Her secret.

'What about us? Doesn't that compare?' Chris leaned on the bar and tried to catch the barmaid's attention.

'No. That was much more special. More special than anything.' Determined to start as she meant to go on, Kay took a breath and said, '*Was*.'

He cupped his face with one hand, pushing his elbow on to the bar, and looked straight ahead, studying the bottles of spirits above the optics. It was obvious to Kay he knew exactly what she was saying.

'It's not that I feel any different. You affect me exactly the same way, if not more. But I mistook it for love when it was, I don't know, chemistry.'

'Thanks a bundle.' Still he wouldn't look at her.

'I didn't mean it was only that. I did fall in love, but wasn't it just a holiday romance?'

'You'd best get out while you're ahead.' There was humour in his voice. 'What do you want to drink?'

'I can't be in love with two of you, surely?'

He faced her and raised an eyebrow. 'I never realized you were boss-eyed – two of me? That's original.'

'You remember I told you about Zacchi? Well he came back.'

'Hoo-bloody-ray. Three cheers for the gypsy!' He turned his back to the bar and leaned on it. 'So it's one door closes, another one opens?' He looked angry. 'And I'm out in the cold.'

'It's not like that,' Kay was feeling more wretched by the minute.

'No? Well what is it then? What am I supposed to think, or feel?'

She looked into his warm brown eyes and all the old feelings came flooding back. 'I don't know.'

'I'm here for a week. Then it's back to work. Back to the bakery. Either we carry on where we left off

or end it. It's up to you. You've got six days to think about it.'

In bed that night, Kay tried to weigh everything up. She tried to analyse the two weeks with Chris in Spain, and then how she and Zacchi were together again, after nearly three years.

Closing her eyes, Kay tried to clear her mind of all that was worrying and upsetting her. As she began to doze off, the noise of trains and traffic moved further into the distance and the imagined face of Zacchi filled her with a comforting feeling. Soon he would be back. She hadn't realized just how much she was missing him.

She wondered whether she would have felt comfortable taking him with her to the dinner party at Jeannie's if he had been around. What should she wear, and who else would be there? More importantly, she feared she might feel right out of her depth.

'Jeannie – you've done it again! This goulash is even better than Tibor serves in the Budapest, and that's saying something.' Bill, a commercial artist, lifted his glass of Bull's Blood and winked at the proud hostess.

'I do my best,' Jeannie was in her element.

'It's really nice,' Kay smiled shyly. 'I've never tasted it before.'

There was a brief hush as all attention was turned to her. 'You mean you haven't been to the Budapest or the Gay Hussar?' Bill's Hungarian wife raised an eyebrow and smiled.

'Oh, oh!' Bill laughed. 'Susie looks as if she's just found a new disciple.'

'The next time we go, you must come. And in return, you could take us to a pie and mash shop in the East End. I love the East End.' Susie turned to the others. 'Cockneys are truly wonderful people.'

With trepidation Kay told Susie she would be pleased to take them on a pub-crawl if they wanted. All eight guests thought that a wonderful idea, and raised their glasses to Kay who was already feeling tipsy from the wine. Jeannie's fiancé, Rob, turned out to be a lot of fun as well as a really nice person. Sitting next to Kay on the green velvet Victorian *chaise longue*, he explained a few things about writing fiction as well as good copy. His friend Harold, a playwright, threw in a couple of tips about characterization and dialogue. They had obviously been filled in by Jeannie about Kay wanting to write, and having some talent in that direction.

'*Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* is a fine example of good use of the camera. Hardly any dialogue, but

full of innuendo and subtext. Have you seen it, Kay?' Rob asked.

'No, I haven't. I haven't seen that many films since I was a child. My aunt Liz used to sell ice-cream at the local cinema, so I could always get in free. I loved it.'

'Paris Pullman. That's the place.' Bill turned to the others. 'We could go now!'

A chorus of *No!* resounded through the room. Everyone was enjoying themselves enough not to want to go out.

'I've never heard of the Paris Pullman. Is it a theatre?'

'No, love. It's one of the best little cinemas in town.'

'We'll take you there too. After we've eaten at—'

'The Budapest!' they all yelled, poking fun at Susie.

'Well I don't know about you lot, but I'm making a move,' said a petite redhead called Christine. 'I want to be down Portobello good and early. I'm very low on stock.'

'Ah, speaking of which, Chris darling,' Rob placed his arm around her slim waist. 'I've seen a lovely little stripped pine table in your window which would double up as a writing-desk for yours truly . . .'

'Thirty pounds to you,' she kissed him lightly on the cheek.

'Make it twenty-four and you've got a sale.'

'When can you collect?'

'And I saw a pair of Vicky serving spoons.' Jeannie gently pulled Rob away from Christine. 'If you're to have the table, my love . . .' she said, seducing him with her green almond-shaped eyes.

'I know the ones you mean. Silver plate, I'm afraid. Bit pricey.'

'How pricey?'

'Eighteen.'

Conversation bubbled and rose between the eight guests as Kay sat with her feet tucked under her, on an enormous old worn African pouffe. She was out of the action now. They were discussing antiques and the best auction rooms where you could still pick up a bargain. She was more than happy to sit and watch in the lovely Georgian sitting room of Jeannie's flat, which was crammed full of interesting furniture, rugs and pictures, a mix of attractive old furniture and genuine antiques.

Picking up her hand-painted pottery cup, she remembered the Whitechapel art gallery where she used to go on Saturday mornings. She had never quite got the hang of the potter's wheel. Running

her finger round the rim of the chunky cup, she thought how nice it would be to own a set like this one. Greyish-mauve with delicately painted leaves.

'Carnaby Street, love. And not as expensive as it looks. Tiny shop where they throw the pots themselves. First on the left after Liberty's on the right.' Rob winked at her, and she couldn't help laughing at him. He was as drunk as her dad and uncles got when they had a beer party.

'What are we gonna do about this brother of yours, eh? That is the question!'

'I'm not allowed to kidnap him.' Kay wondered why she had said that; she wasn't thinking it. Maybe it was the wine, not to mention the liqueurs.

'Oh no. Mustn't do that.' He tapped his nose. 'I'll think of something, worry not!'

'I've got the address now, of his mother. I know where she lives. I got it out of my mum, eventually.'

'Did you now? Clever girl. The art of good journalism is—'

'Stop boring her, Rob.' Jeannie smiled down at Kay. 'You look all in, love.'

'I think I'm drunk. I could fall asleep on the spot.'

'Well, no need for that. Come on. I'll see you safely to the boxroom.'

Having said her goodbyes, and accepted all kinds of invites to dinner, Kay was pleased to be alone in the tiny guest room. The single, old brass bed felt very welcoming as she slipped between crisp white sheets. Two minutes later, she was fast asleep.

Kay could not be sure whether it was the chime from the grandfather clock in the hall or the loud laughter coming from below that had woken her, and she peered at her watch. It was almost two-thirty in the morning.

Creeping out of her room and heading for the bathroom, she picked up a strange but somehow familiar smell drifting up the stairs. It reminded her of the bonfires her grandfather made in the back garden when he was burning dead leaves.

From the lower half of the staircase she could see the group through an open door. They certainly knew how to enjoy themselves, talking and laughing, some more hysterical than others. Jeannie and Rob were sitting cross-legged on the floor, listening with amusement to Bill relating a story from his travels in India the previous year.

There were more empty wine bottles on the coffee table and a bottle of whisky, two-thirds empty. Kay guessed they were all a bit tiddly, hence the excellent

party mood. Sitting herself down on the stairs, she sniffed the air. It was a good smell. She liked it. Looking back at the group, she saw Jeannie draw long and hard on a cigarette and then pass it to Bill. The penny dropped. This was no ordinary smoke. It was a reefer.

Feeling like a spy, she quickly made her way back to her room and threw herself on the bed. So this is what they got up to. Drugs! She wondered why it didn't shock her the way she expected it to. Maybe it was because they all looked and sounded so happy.

If her dad could see what they were up to he would throw a fit and drag her away. Just as well he would never know.

As her head sank back into the feather pillow she felt strangely flattered to be there. It was a pity they didn't trust her enough to smoke while she was in the sitting room. Maybe another time they might invite her to join them?

Turning over and settling down again, she was more than pleased to be a guest in this other world which was so different from her own. She had no doubt that Zacchi would fit in perfectly. Susie the Hungarian had gone on quite a bit about gypsies and how much she admired their way of life and their ancestry.

Yes, Kay found herself thinking: it was Zacchi

who would fit in, and not Chris. It was becoming clearer by the day which one of them she was really in love with.

The Friday evening before Zacchi was due home, Kay and Pamela went to the Black Boy with their friends. Tommy and Micky were there, as usual, chatting up the girls.

'So whose house are we gonna go back to then?' Micky was ready for a party.

'Not mine. The old man's decided to return to the nest – unfortunately.' A tall, broad-shouldered mod piped up.

'Your old lady still on 'oliday, Tommy?'

'Yep.'

'Well then?'

'Nope,' he looked across at Kay and winked. 'I've got other plans.'

The small crowd let out a chorus of catcalls and whistles which angered Kay. 'I hope you're not referring to me. I'm not in the habit of visiting strange men's homes.'

'No? Oh well,' he shrugged, 'I just had this feeling.'

'Well get rid of it then,' Kay smiled, 'my boyfriend's due back tomorrow.' She tried her best not to put Tommy down.

It didn't take long before the incident was forgotten, at least by most of the crowd. The chatting up continued to the sound of the jukebox and Bobby Vee, singing 'Run to Him', filled the bar.

Amused by Tommy's sense of humour at choosing the record, Kay gave him a broad smile.

'Can't win 'em all!' Tommy shrugged, making his way towards her.

'I'm just an old-fashioned girl who doesn't two-time,' Kay said.

'That's what I like about you. You're decent.'

Kay looked around to see where Pamela had got to. She was across the room having what looked like an intimate conversation with one of the other boys. So much for her undying love for Charles.

As Tommy drank his pint, Kay noticed his attention drawn to the bar door as it opened. Within seconds a hush had settled on the group. Turning to see who had walked in, Kay was delighted to see Terry and Ray. She was just about to wave them over when a tall eighteen-year-old blocked her view. He was standing close to Terry and indicating with his thumb that he and his friend should leave. Terry and Ray stood their ground and an argument began to break out. Unable to get through the mob that had moved forward, Kay felt her pulse quicken.

Pulling on Tommy's sleeve she shouted at him,

but he wasn't listening. 'They're my friends!' she yelled at one of the men behind the bar.

'It only takes one to set the rest of them off,' he shrugged.

Trapped on the wrong side of the small crowd which was gathering around Terry and Ray, Kay used all her strength to push her way through until she almost fell through the door and on to the ground outside.

Still cursing and screaming at the mob to leave them be, she grabbed at one of their jackets. A strong arm swung backwards at her, hitting the side of her face. Defiantly, she went back again and yelled for Tommy who turned and glared at her.

'Get inside!' He looked fit to kill. No longer the handsome smiling face she had warmed to, but a very different, ugly person.

Through the crowd she could see that Terry was on the floor, that they were kicking him. Ray was being held back by two others, having to watch his mate take a hiding. She could see Terry's face as it screwed up in agony as one kick after the other went in. When she saw a black shoe ramming into his head she let out a shrill scream, which was lost in the roar of wild abuse.

Blood was oozing thickly from Terry's ear and his eyes were closed. Still they continued to kick

until the sound of a police car could be heard in the distance.

Sobbing, Kay grabbed Tommy's arm as, with the others, he turned to run. 'Why did you do that? I don't understand!'

Pulling away from her, he spat on the ground in disgust and ran from the scene, disappearing down an alley.

'His head, Kay! His head!' Ray was kneeling beside Terry and crying. 'Look at his head.'

Wiping her tears with the back of her hand, Kay nodded. 'He'll be all right, he'll be all right,' she mumbled over and over, wanting desperately to believe it.

The blood trickling from Terry's ear began to flow more heavily, and then came in short, dark red bursts. She looked from Terry to Ray, unable to move, while Ray's face was turning white before her eyes. When he passed out and dropped to the floor she could do nothing but stare at their limp bodies on the pavement, the sound of bells ringing loud as the police arrived.

'You can't lie in bed crying all day, Kay,' Jack quietly scolded. He didn't know how to comfort her when he was so full of anger himself. Laura had taken the news badly and had gone to see

Terry's mother, hoping to hear that he had survived the savage attack.

'You should have been there . . . you can't imagine how quickly they changed. My friends changed from really nice blokes to a vicious mob. It was like they became animals.'

Jack sat on the edge of her bed and stroked her hair. 'I know, babe. I've seen it before, worse luck. I can't explain it to you. No one can. Animal instincts, I suppose.' He sighed heavily. 'But I do know this much. If me and a few others had been passing by, we would have given them flash boys an 'idin'. The difference is we'd 'ave used our fists and not our feet.'

'I begged Tommy, but it was as if he couldn't hear or didn't want to. I can't believe how he changed in seconds.'

'How about a nice hot cup of sweet tea?' Jack was finding the conversation too much.

'I think Terry's gonna die, Dad.'

'Now don't say that! Of course he's not!'

'You didn't see what a mess they made of his head. Never mind the rest of his body.'

'Your mother'll be back soon with the news. If you get yourself up, have a nice bath, then I'll take you to the hospital to see him. How's that sound?'

'If he doesn't die, he'll have brain damage.' Kay stared up at the ceiling.

'Now stop it!' Jack shouted. 'Get up and get dressed. Do something positive, instead of lying there feeling sorry for yourself!'

Once outside her room, Jack drew his hand across his face and gritted his teeth. It wouldn't do for him to shed tears. Not right then.

'I'll make some toast as well! Your mother'll kill me if I let you starve—' He just stopped himself from saying *to death*.

When Kay opened the door to Zacchi later that day, she fell into his arms and wept on his shoulder. He had telephoned from Dover earlier on, and all she had managed to say in between sobs was that something terrible had happened to Terry.

'I could do with a cup of tea.' He was too moved at seeing her grief to give her words of comfort. Her lovely face was swollen and her silky blonde hair was all over the place and damp with tears.

'They kicked Terry's head,' her voice was a whisper in his ear. 'My friends almost kicked the life out of him.'

Gently withdrawing himself from her arms, he looked into her face. 'Kay?' Again he could not find the words.

'They didn't kill him.' She pulled a handkerchief

from her sleeve and blew her red nose. 'He's in hospital though. Intensive care.'

'Are we allowed to visit?' he said quietly.

'I think so. I'm not sure. Let's go anyway, Zac, please?'

''Course we'll go.' He walked her into the kitchen. 'I bought this bottle of duty-free for your parents.' He held the bottle hopefully.

Kay smiled. 'Brandy. Yeah, they won't mind if we open it. You've only just missed 'em. They've popped round the Eagle for a quick drink. This 'as really gutted them.'

'I'm sure.' Zacchi turned away and filled the kettle. 'It's not easy to take in, is it?'

Sitting down, Kay felt a wave of comfort. It was good to have him back. She wanted to tell him how much she had missed him. But it didn't seem the right time.

'We'll go after we've had coffee, then?'

'Yep. After coffee.' Zacchi knew she couldn't wait to see how her friend was but he also knew she needed to relax a little before they left. 'They might not let us in. You should be prepared for that.'

''Course they will,' she snapped at him, as if by saying it he was siding with authority.

'I have to obey orders,' the slim, dark-haired nurse

was sorry. 'I daren't let you go in. Only his next of kin. Leave it a couple of days.'

'But I'm like his sister! Just ask him if he wants to see me. Please! Just go and ask him.'

Looking from Kay to Zacchi, she shrugged. 'Wouldn't be much point. He hasn't regained consciousness.' She backed away and gave a reassuring smile. 'Phone tomorrow evening, around this time. Ask for Nurse Derrick. I'll tell you how he is then. OK?'

'Will he live?' Kay could not contain herself. 'He's not gonna die, is he?' She was daring the nurse to say yes.

'Try not to think the worst. There's a chapel on the second floor. Why not pray for him?'

The sound of the nurse's heels on the marble floor echoed as she walked quickly away down the corridor. *Pray for him . . . Pray for him . . . Pray for him . . .* The words ran through Kay's brain. She looked pleadingly into Zacchi's eyes.

'Come on,' he managed, 'we'll go for a walk.'

Arriving at Bethnal Green Park an hour before the gates were due to close, Kay was secretly pleased to see that old Sid was there, enjoying an ice-cream.

'OK if we join you?' Kay knew it would be and sat close beside him on the sun-heated wall, with just his big black Bible between them.

'That's some accordion you're got there,' said Zacchi, and he swept his fingers over the ornate polished brass edging that glinted in the evening sun.

Sid studied Zacchi's face and then smiled. A twinkle returned to his blue eyes and the guarded look dissolved. 'Romany?' he said.

'That obvious?' Zacchi took an instant liking to the old man.

Turning his attention to Kay, Sid pursed his lips and waited, as she twisted a handkerchief in her hands.

'My friend's in hospital,' she said. 'On the danger list.'

'Does he know anything about it?'

'He's unconscious, if that's what you mean.'

'Then he probably doesn't.' Sid wiped ice-cream from his fingers on one of the rolled-up newspapers that were stuffed inside his old gabardine mackintosh.

'He might not survive.'

Sid's mischievous, knowing laughter stopped Kay in her tracks. Sometimes he could be irritating. She bit her lip while he picked up his accordion and began to play softly.

'How can you laugh, Sid?' She was begging him to say something that would make her feel better.

'Would he want us to cry?'

'Maybe!'

'No. If he is hovering between this world and the next, he'll be able to see you. And it's my humble opinion that if he had a voice, he would tell you the real meaning of death and birth and life, body and soul.' Before Kay could ask any more questions, Sid began to play and sing.

> Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
> O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
> Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
> For we have no help but thee;
> Yet possessing every blessing,
> If our God our Father be . . .

Without any prompting from Sid, Kay joined in on the second verse. Zacchi was too moved to sing, and the hair on his neck stood up. Once that verse was finished, Sid began to walk away, his voice filling the empty park grounds.

> Spirit of our God, descending,
> Fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
> Love with every passion blending,
> Pleasure that can never cloy;
> Thus provided, pardoned, guided,
> Nothing can our peace destroy

* * *

'He's special all right. You're lucky to have him in your part of the world,' said Zacchi.

'He's always been here.'

'No, not always. Since as far back as you can remember. He must be in his seventies, and you're only seventeen.'

'That's true. I hadn't thought about that. He doesn't have a cockney accent, as it 'appens,' she remarked.

'Doesn't have any accent. The man from nowhere.' Zacchi grabbed Kay's hand. 'Come on, before we get locked in for the night.'

Taking his hand in hers she pulled him towards her, and as they clung together, drawing comfort, Kay realized that Zacchi had become the mainstay of her existence. She couldn't imagine herself without him. He was part of her, and of her world.

Nuzzling into his neck she kissed him lightly. 'I love you,' she murmured.

Cupping her face, Zacchi looked more serious than she had ever seen him. He sighed and nodded briefly. It was his way of saying he loved her too. 'Where to now?'

'Hackney?'

'Kay, this is my first day back. Can't we just sit in the nearest pub garden?'

'If I sit still, I'll start thinking about last night and Terry, I know I will.'

'OK. So who lives in Hackney?' He sounded bored and tired.

'It's only a fifteen-minute walk. And I've got loads to tell you.' She took his hand and led him along towards the library. 'You'll never guess what I've got.'

'Go on then. Shock me.'

'A little brother,' she grinned.

Looking puzzled at her, he frowned until his dark eyebrows met. 'You're sure about that, are you? I've only been away two weeks and the last time I saw your mother she looked very slim.'

'Half-brother. Dad's been a naughty boy.'

He let out a low whistle. 'Yes, well, that's fairly shocking. How did you find out?'

By the time they had reached the Bethnal Green museum she had filled him in on everything; her first plan to snatch Jac, and the second more sensible one of Jeannie's, to use the power of the pen.

'We thought that if I went to see her and explained why he should be with us and not in a home she might see sense, and if she doesn't, tell her how bad it would look in a national newspaper—'

'National newspaper?' Zacchi cut in.

'So, I'd be telling a white lie. Jeannie said it would

go in *Female Weekly* so it's not that much of a fib, is it? We just thought it would sound more threatening if it was a daily.'

'You're evil.'

'And she's not? Putting a two-and-a-half-year-old in a home, with strangers? When he could be with his blood-father?'

Zacchi eyed her suspiciously. 'So who is it lives in Hackney?'

'Don't worry, not her. She's up in Leicester. We're going to see a very good friend of mine who I used to see on the bus when I worked at Thompson's. I miss her.'

As they turned into Tanner Street, Kay began to tell Zacchi about the dinner party she'd been to in the week. Her new arty friends in Hampstead. How they were both invited the following Friday to one of the guests' flats for dinner somewhere in Chelsea. He was an abstract painter and she a sculptor.

'Count me out thanks.' Zacchi sounded resolute.

'What do you mean, count you out? Don't be so bloody pompous!'

'I've met their kind, they bore the life out of me. So you go and have nice long debates about life, the universe and art. See how long you last.' He winked cheekily at her.

'I like them, Zacchi. I really enjoy being in their

company. It's got to be better than just standing in a pub listening to the jukebox.'

'What did they give you to eat, then?' he smirked.

'Hungarian goulash. With small dumplings and cucumber salad. God, you can be annoying.' She pulled her hand out of his. 'You think you're above it all. I don't suppose you'll like Juanita either!' She pressed her finger on the black and white porcelain bell.

The door slowly opened and a very tall, very good-looking, broad-shouldered young man stood smiling at them, as if quite aware of his beautiful row of even, sparkling white teeth.

'Hey, you brought a chaperone!'

'Sorry?' Kay thought he must be mixing her with someone else.

'We don't eat white girls, you know. Come in.' Malcolm stood aside, bowed and waved them in.

'Mum and Dad should be back in an hour. Tea or cold drink?'

'Nothing, thanks.' She cleared her throat. 'Do you know who I am?'

'The lovely Kay. The daughter she should have had – you see what I'm saying? Never mind the white skin.' He turned to Zacchi. 'We've all been waiting to meet her. All three sons. Shame about you – know what I mean?' he grinned.

'Who plays the guitar?' Zacchi asked, ignoring the flirting going on between Malcolm and Kay.

Eyeing a soft armchair, Kay was tempted to push her shoes off and drop into it. 'Do you mind if I sit down? I feel as if I've walked miles.'

'My pleasure.' Picking up his guitar, he lovingly drew his fingers across the strings. 'It's mine. You see what I'm saying? My woman. The only woman I've had the pleasure of . . .' he lightly strummed a few chords.

'If you can believe that,' Kay rolled her eyes. 'Give us a song, then.' She looked across at Zacchi. 'Don't suppose you still keep the old mouth-organ in your pocket?'

'New mouth-organ.'

'Hey! Fab. Let's make some music.' Malcolm threw the guitar strap over his shoulder.

Curling her legs under her, Kay felt very much at home. She liked the way the room was furnished, it reminded her of Juanita. The well-polished second-hand oak furniture was simple, and the embroidered chair-back covers on the three-piece suite brightened up the dark green upholstery.

'What can you play?' she asked.

'You name it.' Malcolm hugged his guitar.

'You want me to choose?' She was enjoying being made to feel special. It was just what she needed.

'Be my guest.' He took a bow.

'That'll do for a starter.'

'"Be My Guest?" OK.' He turned to Zacchi. 'Know it?'

'You play – I'll come in.'

Within minutes, the room was filled with lively music and song. It was one of Kay's favourites. Turning her attention to the door which was slowly opening, she was amused to see Malcolm's brother dance his way in. It didn't take him long to pick up the tune on the piano and belt out the words.

A bit later, while they were performing 'Teddy Bear', Kay remembered Terry. This was one of his favourite Elvis Presley numbers which he used to sing accompanying himself on his guitar.

While the two brothers and Zacchi were hamming it up for fun, Kay felt a pang of guilt. Her best friend was lying in hospital, his life in the balance, and she was enjoying herself.

'I want to go now, Zac.' She stood up and tried to get his attention. 'Zacchi, I want to go.'

Involved now and enjoying themselves, they circled her, singing and playing louder and louder.

'I'll wait outside, OK?' she tried to smile. 'I've got a headache,' she said, searching for an excuse.

Once outside, Kay leaned on the brick wall and waited, while they finished the song and started on

another – which was obviously meant for her. The chorus drifted out through the open door.

Qué sera, sera . . . They could never know just how much their mock crooning was causing her pain. Not wishing to dampen their spirits, she walked slowly away.

'I was getting a kick out of that,' Zacchi said, arriving by her side out of breath. 'Why did you leave?'

'I'm sorry, Zac. I needed some air.'

'Now that's what I call good company.'

'I know. I had a feeling it would be OK. I took to Juanita when we first met, as well. It was as if we'd known each other for years.'

'Bit like when we first spoke,' Zacchi lifted her hand and gently kissed it. 'Terry'll be all right, you'll see.'

Pressing her lips together she nodded. There was no need for explanations. He knew what she was going through.

The following day, unable to lie in as she normally did on Sundays, Kay was up at the crack of dawn drafting out a letter to Patsy. She was taking Zacchi's advice and writing to ask if she would please think about letting her family adopt Jac. She promised they would send the fare so that Patsy could visit every

week for a year. She would send it all, one sum of money, which she had been left by an uncle.

Glancing up at the top of her wardrobe, she felt relieved to have found what she believed was an acceptable way of disposing of Frank and Freddie's envelope. Finishing the letter, she urged:

> I feel as if we are related in a kind of way, you being the mother of my brother. I hope we can meet. I would be on the next train if I thought you wouldn't mind. A day doesn't go by when I'm not thinking about my brother. I wish my dad had told me before now. Before good news became bad news. I'm referring to Jac being in a home amongst strangers.
>
> My very best wishes,
>
> Kay Armstrong

She looked across at her typewriter on her dressing table and wondered whether to type it out or rewrite it in her best handwriting. She decided on the latter.

By nine o'clock both Laura and Jack were up and Kay was on her way out to post the letter which was hidden in her jeans pocket. 'I'm going round Terry's. See if there's any news.'

Laura frowned, throwing some strips of bacon into the frying pan. 'I'm not sure that's a good

idea, Kay. His mum wasn't the least bit pleased to see me yesterday. Well, that was the impression I got, anyway.'

'She always was a bit moody.' Kay grabbed an apple from the fruit dish. 'Probably be all right today. I'll buy her a box of Dairy Milk on the way.'

Stepping out into the quiet, sunny morning lifted Kay. As she pushed the doorbell and waited for Terry's mother to answer, she felt good having posted her letter, and looked forward to the response, if any. One way or another it would get things moving. If Patsy's reply was negative, she would put plan B into action. She would take a train to Leicester and see her in person. If that didn't work, she would carry out Jeannie's plan of threatening to write the article.

'You've got a nerve showing up here.' Terry's mum caught her off guard. 'It's because of you that my son's where he is now.' She stepped back and looked ready to slam the door shut.

Kay could hardly believe her ears. 'But I had nothing to do with it!' She pushed her hand against the closing door. 'Please don't—'

'You and your flash friends. He would never 'ave gone to that pub if it wasn't for you. Why couldn't you have stayed away, left him be? If the truth were known, you're partly to blame for the way he's

turned out anyway. Picking blackberries with you when he should have been kicking a ball about!'

'Terry's the way he is because that's the way he was born. He knows that, and so should you by now!' Knowing she had overstepped the mark she tried to apologize, but the door slammed shut between them.

Determined to have her way, she grabbed the iron knocker and banged it three times. When the door abruptly opened again she pushed her shoulder against it and forced a foot forward. 'If you shut the door on me again, you'll crush my leg.'

'Just go away and leave me to mourn my son!'

Kay swallowed hard. Mourn her son? 'What are you saying?' She just managed to get the words out.

'You surely don't expect him to pull through this, do you? A cat tied to a tree and stoned would stand more chance!'

'You mustn't say that. Terry will live, I know he will.'

'And when it's time to bury him? Where's the money gonna come from, eh? I don't even have enough to buy a cheap coffin!' Mrs Button grabbed the edge of the door for support as her legs buckled under her.

In a flash Kay was there, catching her before she

fell to the floor, pulling her inside and closing the door behind them. She ran into the front room and grabbed a couple of cushions from the sofa, placing one under her head and one under her knees.

'It's OK, Mrs Button. I'll get you a glass of water. You'll be fine. You fainted, that's all.'

Mrs Button moaned and rolled her eyes as Kay backed into the kitchen. Filling a glass, she forced back the tears. It wouldn't help to get emotional.

Supporting her head, Kay brought the glass to her lips. 'Sip this. You'll soon feel better.'

'Can you help me into the front room? I'd rather be sitting up, in an armchair.'

Once she had settled Mrs Button and made her comfortable, Kay went into the kitchen to make them both a cup of sweet weak tea. Waiting for the kettle to boil, she scanned the small back room. Apart from all the crockery on the blue-and-yellow-painted units, in one corner on the Formica surface was a tray with two of everything. Two dinner plates, two cups, two saucers, two tea plates, two soup bowls.

'Oh, Terry . . .' Kay murmured. 'You mustn't die. You mustn't.' A shrill whistle made her jump as steam forced its way out of the spout.

'I didn't mean what I said earlier, love. I'm all at sixes and sevens.' As Mrs Button looked at her,

Kay couldn't help noticing her eyelids which were rapidly twitching above her tired eyes.

'Do you think they'd let me see him today? If I went in with you?' Kay hugged her cup of tea and hoped she might say yes.

'No. They're very strict about that sort of thing. Daft really. I could do with someone by my side.' Her voice trailed off and her eyes filled with tears. 'There's only my sister, and she's emigrated to Canada. God knows where Terry's dad is.'

'Why don't you ask the police if they can trace him?' Kay couldn't imagine herself lying critically ill and her dad not being there.

'We'll see.' Terry's mum let her head drop back in the cushioned armchair. Staring up at the ceiling, she slipped deep into her own thoughts.

'Is there anything I can do?' Kay asked.

No reply came. It was as if she hadn't spoken. As if she wasn't there. 'I could stay overnight if you wanted?'

Still the tired face showed no sign of response. The woman looked drained and beaten. Kay tried to stop herself thinking the worst. If Terry didn't survive the beating, his mother would have nothing to live for, and it showed.

Looking around the room, it was evident that they had not had an easy time of it. The floor was covered

in a cheap brown lino which, though highly polished, showed signs of age. There were cracks and worn patches and a threadbare rug did nothing to make the room look cosy. The skimpy, faded gold and white curtains on each side of the bay window were unlined and Kay doubted that once drawn together they would meet.

Her mind went to the envelope and the money she had promised to Patsy. She felt suddenly guilty at having had such a comfortable upbringing. Her family had never really wanted for anything, in comparison to the existence she had seen in Terry's home.

Kay didn't want to leave the woman by herself, but she could see that staying would not only be a waste of time but an intrusion. Mrs Button wanted no one but her son and Kay could do nothing for her there. Nothing could be said or done to make either of them feel any better.

Walking home through the backstreets, Kay decided that until she was allowed to visit, any information about Terry would have to be drawn from the nurse she had spoken to the previous day. She would phone her for updates on his condition.

Life seemed so unfair. Her friend Terry was the very person she had chosen to tell about the way she felt inside about losing her baby. It would have

been easier somehow, talking to him. Pamela would not have let her forget it as easily as he would. Now she would have to keep it bottled up inside for a while longer -- until he was up and smiling again.

Chapter Fourteen

Three weeks had passed since Kay first wrote to Patsy, and they had exchanged several letters. Bernard and Lillian found it strange that mail care of them had been arriving for Kay, but said nothing, after their first interrogation with Pamela. She had told them it was very personal and private – a confidential family matter.

'There's nothing else for it but to go up there,' Kay said, as they sat in Pamela's bedroom.

'Rather you than me.' Pamela was more interested in the *Melody Maker* she was reading.

'I don't suppose you fancy coming with me?'

'No.'

'Thanks. I always knew I could count on you.' Kay was beginning to wonder if she and her childhood friend were drifting away from each other. They seemed to have different attitudes about everything lately. Pamela hadn't even been with her to see Terry in hospital.

'I don't know why you don't drop it. She doesn't want the kid to move in with your family, surely that's obvious by now.' She didn't look up from her paper.

'Think I'll go tomorrow, get the early train. Go straight to the children's home. Say I'm a cousin or something.'

Looking defiantly at Kay, Pamela pushed her hair away from her face. 'You said you would come up west with me!'

'I think this is a little more important than you buying a new dress.'

'Well I don't! I want it for the party tomorrow night. We haven't been out since Terry's . . . you know.' She pretended to be absorbed in something she saw in the paper. 'If you're not seeing your precious Zacchi, you're brooding over him.'

'I do not brood over Terry. I happen to think he's better off where he is at the moment, than out here.'

'You're only saying that so you don't have to face the truth. He's on his deathbed and you know it.'

Lighting herself a cigarette, Kay leaned back on Pamela's bed. 'I'm longing to see my little brother.' She tried to blow a smoke ring towards the ceiling. 'They say he looks just like me.'

'Oh, bloody well go then! Get it over with.' Pamela was sick of hearing it.

'I intend to. Might even bring him back with me.'

'Don't talk rubbish.' She licked her finger and flicked a page over. 'When are we supposed to appear in court then?'

'I don't know.' It was the last thing Kay wanted to think about.

'I suppose we'll get a letter?'

'Yes.'

'Put the bastards away once and for all.' She gazed up at Kay, a different expression on her face. 'What made them do it?'

'I don't want to talk about it, Pam. I don't want to think about it, OK?' Her voice was remote with tension. 'Anyway, we might not have to go. There were other witnesses. My dad's trying to get us out of it.'

'Why? I'll go! I don't care. I'll bloody well tell them what happened. Wicked gits. I'll never forget what they did—'

'Shut up!' Kay clenched her fists. 'Mention it again and I'll put my hand through a window!' She glared at her friend, daring her to answer back.

'OK, OK! Fair enough. Calm down.'

'Terry's all right. He's not in as much pain now. Right?'

'Yeah, yeah, you're right, of course you are,' Pamela smiled and held out her hand, but Kay edged away.

'I'll be round on Sunday.'

'What about the party tomorrow night?' Pamela was losing her patience.

'Count me out. I'm not in the mood for dancing. Anyway, you never know what kind of people you're mixing with. Not any more, anyway.'

Kay and Laura were in the kitchen idly looking through a mail-order catalogue when Jack's piercing cry shot through the flat. Looking up, they waited to hear what might follow. Nothing came. A haunting silence filled the place.

Shrugging at Kay, Laura cautiously left the kitchen and went into the living room. 'What now?' she asked, dreading the answer.

As Jack sat there, head turned away, she caught sight of the headlines on the newspaper in his hands.

VICIOUS ATTACK LEADS TO SUICIDE.

Jack jumped up from his armchair and stormed out of the living room, throwing Laura into shock. She stood paralysed.

Once on the back balcony, the newspaper still in his clenched fist, Jack punched the brick wall over and over, crying and cursing until his knuckles bled.

Staring at his fist he shouted out loud. 'Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!'

Kay rushed past Laura and stood in the veranda doorway.

'What is it, Dad? What's happened?'

Slowly raising his head, Jack's face twisted as he began to cry. 'Kay . . . I'm sorry, babe,' he shook his head. 'I don't know what else to say.' He handed them the newspaper and walked into the living room crouching down on the edge of an armchair.

Reading the lead story, Kay's face was slack with disbelief. 'He was terrified of coming out of hospital,' she murmured. 'He slashed his wrists.' She dropped the paper on the floor and walked out of the room and out of the flat.

Heading for nowhere in particular, Kay just kept walking. Thoughts seemed to be flying over her head instead of through it.

Nothing to think about. Not the past, not the present, not the future. No one. No one must be in her mind. They must all be cleared out. Friends, family, colleagues. An empty space. Empty room. Her head must be like an empty room. Only she would be there, standing alone. On a platform ordering everyone out. One by one they go. Out of the door, everyone. Only herself in the big, empty silent room. None to be allowed back in. Not then. Not ever. She would

stay there for ever. By herself . . . by herself . . . by herself. Until she was ready to let new friends in. Jeannie and other people. Other people who led uncomplicated lives. Her legs would be strong. They would support her. She would walk around the empty room. Around the room. Around and around the room . . . By herself. Up and down. By herself.

'I couldn't believe it. I wasn't going fast, just biking along. And she walked out. I don't know how I missed her. She just seemed to drop down in front of me.' The man stood on the doorstep, his pale face pleading with Laura to believe him. 'I promise yer, I didn't knock her down. I think she's coming round now. Nearly gave me heart attack an' all!'

'Bring her in,' Laura waved the small group of curious children away from the door. Having seen Kay being carried by the stranger, they wanted to be part of the drama.

Laying her gently down on the sofa, the man shook his head. 'Scared the life out of me, I tell yer.'

'What happened?' Kay moaned.

'She didn't look right you know. It was like she was sleepwalking or something.' He was becoming less defensive by the second. 'I mean, if she's ill I don't think . . . I mean I could have bloody killed her!'

'Look, I would offer you a cup of tea but we've

had a bit of a shock. A tragedy.' Laura hoped he would just go.

'That ginger-headed kid'll tell you. She saw what happened. I don't know how I managed to swerve in time! My bike's bound to have some scratches.' Remembering his bike gave him something else to think about. 'That balcony looks out on the road, don't it?' He rushed out to check what was happening below.

'Mum . . .' Kay was trying to focus, get her bearings.

'It's all right. Lie back and rest.' Laura's attention was half on her, half on the hyperactive cyclist, with his mac flapping around him.

Rushing through the room, the man almost tripped over his own feet. 'Bloody kids all round it now. Little sods. Bound to nick me pump!' His voice disappeared with him as he rushed through the flat.

'Who was that?'

'I have no idea, Kay.' Laura tried to keep a straight face. 'You OK?'

'Is Terry really dead?' her glazed eyes questioning.

'Yeah.' Laura parted her lips and took in a deep breath. She was lost for words. What could she say?

'It's all right, I'm not gonna cry. I'm really not.'

Kay raised herself on one elbow. 'I tried to. For the first time in my life I actually tried to cry instead of trying to stop. I'm all dried up. Terry's dead. So? He's better out of it anyway. No one in their right mind would choose to be born, would they? Not if they knew what you have to put up with. And yet we kick and fight against leaving. Mad. We're all mad.'

She sat up and stared at nothing. 'I would swap places with Terry like a shot.' Feeling weak, she flopped back on to a cushion.

'You don't mean that.' Laura was unsure how to deal with Kay's mood.

'Oh, I do. Yeah. Sorry, Mum. But I do.' She smiled, closed her eyes and left Laura to do the crying.

After what seemed the longest night in her life, Kay sat in the kitchen with Laura. Neither of them had slept much, and when one did manage to doze off she was disturbed by the other moving around the flat. It wasn't until five o'clock that they were up at the same time.

'I had no idea, Mum. If you'd have seen their living room. Just a few sticks of furniture.' Kay remembered what Terry's mother had said about the funeral. 'She won't even be able to afford a decent coffin.'

'Yes she will. I've seen to it. Yesterday afternoon.'

'How d'yer mean?'

Laura rubbed her eyes and decided it was time to tell Kay a few home truths about some of her relations. 'Freddie and Frank gave your dad some money for aunt Liz. Well, that's who they said it was for.' She sipped her tea and studied Kay's face for a reaction. There was none.

'The money they come by . . . well, it's not exactly kosher.' Again she looked for a response.

'What are you trying to say?' Kay sounded more impatient than surprised.

'Well they're, you know, small-time thieves.'

'Yeah? So?'

'Well we didn't think your aunt Liz'd want to take it—'

''Course she would!' Kay was on the edge of swearing at her mother for being soft.

'I popped an envelope – two hundred pounds – into Mrs Button's letter-box. Just wrote that it was from a well-wisher.' She expected a raised eyebrow from Kay.

'I'm glad you did that, but I'm not sure it's fair on aunt Liz. You should have asked her first.'

Laura found it strange taking advice from her daughter. The tables had certainly turned in the

past few months. 'There were two envelopes handed over. The other one's got three hundred pounds in it.'

'Oh, that's all right then.' Kay swallowed the rest of her tea.

'It doesn't bother you? Your uncles being crooks?'

'No, why should it? At least they don't go round kicking people's heads in.' She poured herself another cup of tea. 'I really like Freddie and Frank. They're good-hearted and generous. I'm not bothered where they get their money from.'

Laura's heart sank as she listened to her daughter who seemed to be getting more hardened by the minute. She felt sure it was the shock of Terry's death, besides everything else that had happened so far that year.

'They invited me and Pamela to the Kentucky Club. I might go.' Kay was being deliberately rebellious. She knew it would upset and worry Laura.

'I can't stop you from doing what you want, Kay, but I will say this. If you do start going down the wrong pathways, it won't be so easy to find your way back to your normal way of living.'

Kay half smiled. 'What's wrong with that?' She had no intention of turning against her uncles. The reverse, in fact. She had been invited to the Kentucky

and that was where she would go. If her uncles could so easily repay one debt, they could repay another. Those flash bastards whom she had thought to be her mates were not going to get away with causing the death of her best and closest friend.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Kay waited for eight-thirty to come round on her small alarm clock. She thought that was probably the time they would be drinking at the club. A drink before they went for a Chinese meal, is what she imagined.

Approaching the unassuming building she could feel her heart pumping faster, and as she got closer she was puzzled by the exterior of the Kentucky Club. Surely this wasn't it? She had expected bright lights and glitter. Film stars and politicians is what Pamela had said. Famous and important people in a place like this?

Beside a small door, she could not miss the sign in black-painted letters, *No. 106A Kentucky Club. Strictly members only*. Smiling to herself but with her heart still thumping, she knocked on the door and was surprised by a sudden movement from the wide letter-box as a make-shift shutter was pulled to one side. Bending down, she tried to sound positive. 'I want to see my uncles. Frank and Freddie.' In a flash the door opened and there stood three men, bouncers. They showed no trace of a smile as they stared her

out. Behind them she saw the sign *All guests must be signed in.*

'My name's Kay Armstrong and I want to see my uncles.'

'They're not here, love. But you can come in and wait.' No trace of compassion in their voices, never mind the endearment.

Stepping inside the bar, she looked around at the seedy club. The smell reminded her of the horrid building in the City where she had gone for an interview. Old metal ashtrays, she thought. Old metal ashtrays and bad lighting. The dark red-embossed flock wallpaper reminded her of the small corner pub where she had once gone to pay her dad's union dues when he had the flu.

In the smoky room, amidst the many smartly dressed bodies, she thought she recognized some of the guests. Famous faces were laughing and talking. Is this it, she thought, is this really how the rich and famous like to spend an evening?

'Give Kay a drink.' One of the bouncers had followed her through. 'She's waiting for Freddie and Frank.'

'No, it's OK. I'm not staying.' She backed towards the open door.

'Any message?'

'No. You don't even have to say I came. It's OK

now. I've just remembered I don't need to ask them what I thought I needed to . . .' She had to get out of there. There was a feeling in the air. A strange feeling of importance, fear and something else she couldn't identify.

Once outside, she leaned on a wall and breathed deep lungfuls of fresh air. 'Sorry, Terry,' she murmured, 'I can't do it.'

With tears streaming down her face she made her way through the backstreets, past the brewery and towards the safety of her home. Still she found herself thinking that Terry was better off out of it. If he went to clubs anything like the one she had just been to, his life could not have been that rich. Law and justice, she decided, would have to seal the fate of the boys who almost kicked the life out of him.

There was no doubt in her mind now. She would have to get away from this sordid part of the world. There had to be better places. Had to be.

When she arrived at the block of flats she sat down on a stone step and cried for the friend she would never see again. She wished over and over that she could turn back the clock. Maybe give him different advice, when they were hop-picking. Safer advice, like don't let anyone know. Hide behind a grey suit. Do anything to stay safe, to stay *alive*.

One thing she did know. Life really was what you made it. And tomorrow she would do her best to make her brother's life happier, come what may.

Standing on the doorstep, the morning sun warming her, Kay felt her anxiety begin to lessen. She could hear the sound of children playing in the garden behind the large Victorian house and wondered if little Jac was one of those laughing. Full of apprehension, she pressed her finger on the doorbell and prayed that she was doing the right thing.

The matron, a woman in her early thirties, looked her up and down as she stood in the doorway of the entrance hall. 'Can I help you?' Her face broke into a warm smile.

A surge of embarrassment rushed through Kay as she struggled to find the right words. 'I wonder if I could come in and talk to someone?'

'To do with—?' The matron's smile was instantly replaced with a look of concern.

'My cousin,' she lied without thinking. 'He lives here.'

'Name?'

'Kay Armstrong.' She felt as if she were being interviewed.

'I'm sorry. We have no one here by that name.' Her bright but firm tone conveyed the message

that she wanted to end the conversation then and there.

Smiling nervously, Kay shook her head. 'No. That's my name. The little boy's called Jac. I was in the area and thought I might pay him a visit.'

'You'd best come in. Though I warn you, we don't allow visitors without parental consent.' She led Kay into a large, old-fashioned room. It wasn't how she had imagined it would be. The curtains with sunflowers printed on them were faded and reminded her of those which used to hang in her grandparents' cottage when she was small, and the green carpet, although spotlessly clean, had several worn patches.

'Would you like a cup of tea while you're waiting?' The matron smiled.

'Yes I would, thanks.'

'Don't hold out too much hope, will you. We'll have to speak to his mother on the phone before we can go forward.' She closed the door behind her and left Kay wondering if she had made a mistake in coming. Trying to imagine what Jac looked like, she warmed again to the thought of having a brother. She felt strongly that she had every right to see him.

Sitting down in one of the armchairs, Kay gazed out of the glass french doors and watched the gardener as he dug over a flower-bed. He reminded her of her grandfather, Billy.

'Good news and bad news,' Matron said as she handed her a cup of tea. 'Mrs Hemmingway doesn't want you to see the boy, but she is on her way here. She wants to meet you.' She sat down opposite Kay. 'Mr Watson, our resident house-uncle, will bring the boy's mother in once she arrives.'

'I suppose she told you who I really am – Jac's sister?'

'Half-sister,' she corrected.

'I'm sorry, but I don't see it like that. He's my dad's son and that makes me his sister as far as I'm concerned. Neither of us are half a person.'

'True,' she smiled again. 'It's always a difficult one—'

'You mean this isn't the first time you've had someone like me knocking on the door?'

'Similar cases. We usually manage to work something out, but it takes time. Be prepared for that.'

'We'll see,' Kay murmured.

'How long have you known about Jac?'

'Not long, a few weeks. I've been writing to his mother. I've asked her if my mum and dad could adopt him. We've got a spare room and even though we live in flats, there's plenty of playing area. Grass as well as tarmac.'

The matron looked back at Kay with sympathy in her eyes, as if she were trying for the impossible.

'I can't wait to see him.' Kay sighed and leaned back in the armchair. 'It's strange. I can't explain it, but ever since I was told, it's as if I've always known, deep down. It might have something to do with my baby brother who died at three months old. I was five or six at the time. I don't really remember, but sometimes I think I do. If that makes sense.'

Both Kay and the matron looked up as the door opened and the house-uncle appeared, followed by Patsy, who looked less than pleased. 'I told you in my letter not to come here,' she said at once.

'Please,' Kay felt a familiar, unwanted mood rising. 'I just want to say hallo to him.' Her tears streamed down despite herself. 'You don't know what it's like.' She wiped her eyes with both hands. 'I think about him all the time; dream about him, have nightmares that he's locked up in a cupboard.' She tried to stop but the words tumbled from her as if she had no control, and her body began to shake.

'I—' she tried to speak but then couldn't get the words out.

'My God. I didn't think she would be *this* concerned,' Patsy said.

'Miss Armstrong is more than upset,' the Matron placed one arm around Kay's shoulder and did her best to comfort her.

'My friend—' Kay tried again, but it was no use.

She looked into the Matron's face, desperate to tell her about Terry. 'My friend—'

'It's OK. Just try to relax. I'm sure Doctor will give you something to calm you.' She glanced up at the house-uncle hoping to get his attention, but he was gazing trancelike at Kay, moved by her sorrow.

'Has something else happened,' the Matron asked, 'apart from finding out about your brother?'

Kay could only nod and make whimpering sounds.

'Wait until you feel better. Then tell me.' She gently held her trembling hands. 'It will pass, I promise you. Just let go for now. Don't try to stop. It's your body reacting. I expect you've been bottling things up.'

'I don't want you to fetch Jac, not now – not with me like this,' Kay managed to stammer.

'You've got yourself in a real state over this, haven't you?' Patsy smiled.

Kay tried to return her smile, but her face felt numb. She sipped her tea, thankful for the warm liquid on her dry throat. After a few silent minutes, she began to feel slightly better. 'I'm sorry about this.'

'No more than I am,' Patsy looked ashamed. 'I've been a bit selfish. Just thinking of number one.' She turned to the house-uncle. 'I had no idea they felt this strongly about Jac.'

'Dad's really cut up about it.'

'Poor Jack. He's not a bad bloke. I just tried to make myself think that way to ease the hurt. I did love him, you know.'

It wasn't what Kay wanted to hear, but it was better than being yelled at, which is what she had half expected.

'Once you've pulled yourself together, we'll bring our Jac in. I think you're gonna be in for a surprise,' she chuckled.

'Mum said he looks like me.' Kay's puffy eyelids and flushed cheeks made her look younger than her seventeen years.

'He does.'

'Are you sure this is what you want, Patsy?' The house-uncle asked, hoping it was.

'It is, actually. Now that I've seen this young lady. She is my Jac's big sister, after all's said and done.'

'Who's that?' Jac pushed a chubby finger in Kay's face, making her laugh.

'*That* is your big sister,' Patsy said with a touch of pride in her voice.

'Isn't,' Jac said quietly, a strange look on his face.

'Oh, yes it is. You gonna give your sister Kay a kiss then?'

Without any prompting, Jac leaned forward and landed a big wet kiss on Kay's mouth.

'Coming?' Kay held out her arms.

'No!'

'I'll go away again.'

'No!'

'I will . . .'

Throwing himself into Kay's arms, he almost knocked Patsy off balance and thought it was hilarious when she pretended it was worse and landed on her bottom.

The three of them spent an hour together, walking around the grounds, playing chase with Jac and swinging him by his arms. An earlier rainstorm had passed, and the sun was warming the wet grass again.

'You can see why I don't want him to be miles away from me. This way I get to see him when I like.'

'Does he mind being here? I would have thought he'd miss his own home.'

Patsy sighed. 'Not at first. It was a novelty, like full-time nursery school. He's been a bit quiet the last couple of visits, mind. He probably thinks this is just a little holiday and that he'll be coming home soon.'

'What will you do if he starts crying when you leave? I couldn't bear that.'

'I don't know, to be perfectly honest. I'll just have to wait and see. It's no worse than boarding school, and plenty of children go there. And look at this place. It's much better than the place we live in, I can tell you.'

'And you wouldn't consider him living with—'

'No.' Patsy wasn't prepared to discuss it. 'But you can visit him, providing you let me know you're coming.'

'Sounds fair.' Kay scooped Jac up again and kissed him on the cheek. 'I'm going home now. But I'll be back to see you, Master Jac.'

'Master Jac,' he giggled, and playfully slapped Kay's face.

'What do you want me to do with the money? Keep it until you come back, or send it by registered post?'

'Keep it for now.' Kay looked at her watch. 'I'm gonna have to run, or I'll miss my train.'

After hugs all round, Kay left the house, smiling and waving and promising she'd see them again soon.

'Kay! What's the flat like, anyway?' Patsy suddenly called after her.

'Nice. And plenty of room to play. See you!'

Waiting on the platform for her train, Kay wondered why Patsy had asked about the flat. Maybe she

was having second thoughts about Jac going down for a weekend visit.

Zacchi had turned up unexpectedly at Jack and Laura's flat, and was slightly miffed that neither of Kay's parents seemed to know where she was. He waited two hours before deciding to leave.

'I'll phone later this evening, see if she's back.'

'OK, son. I'm sorry about this. Seems daft us not knowing where she's got to. We assumed she was round Pamela's. I'll tell her to stay in and wait for your call once she does come in. OK?' Jack gave Zacchi a friendly punch on the shoulder.

After seeing Zacchi out, Jack returned to the kitchen in a black mood. 'What does she think she's playing at?'

'Don't start, Jack. I've had enough. She's got other friends, you know. Zacchi said something about Juanita, someone she used to meet on the bus. Maybe that's where she is.'

'I've no doubt. What *I'm* saying is she should tell us if she's gonna be gone all day!'

Laura bit the end of a thumbnail, something she had never done in her life. 'I've got a horrible feeling we're gonna be saying goodbye to Kay soon.'

Jack got himself a glass of water. 'What makes

you say that?' The tone of his voice said it all. He felt exactly the same.

'She's gonna go. Move out. Away from here.' She pulled her thumb away from her mouth and tucked her hands under her arms. 'She's crossed that line between depending on us and needing to live her own life.'

'Yeah, I know. She's young though, Laura. Eighteen next week. What age is that?'

'I think Zacchi knows it too. She's gonna slip through his net as well, you see if I'm wrong.'

Listening to the dripping of the cold tap that Jack hadn't turned off properly, they sat in the otherwise quiet kitchen. It had been a heavy, stormy day and now, in the late afternoon, black clouds filled the sky darkening the kitchen, but neither Jack nor Laura could be bothered to switch on the light.

When Kay finally came into the kitchen as if it had been just another day, Jack shocked her by slamming his fist down on the kitchen table, his pale face pinched with fury.

'You 'ad no right to go behind my back! First your mother and then you! What am I around 'ere? A fucking ghost or what?' he yelled.

'I was only trying to put right what you've messed up!' Kay shouted back at him. 'I should have been

told about Jac! Keeping my letters from me is one thing,' she clenched her fists and screamed, 'it's not fair!'

Drying her hands on a tea towel, Laura stood between them. 'Have either of you given a thought to what I might be going through?' She threw the tea towel on to the table and turned on Kay.

'Your father's right. You shouldn't have gone without talking to us about it. It wasn't clever!' She took a deep breath, spun around and turned on Jack. 'And as for you, playing silly games, knowing full well I was planning to go to Leicester and not letting on.' She walked out of the kitchen. 'I'm packing my bags and leaving you to it, both of you! Because *I* have had enough!'

The remark took the wind out of both Jack and Kay's sails. They knew Laura well enough to know this might not be an empty threat. Once she made up her mind to do something, she carried it through.

'Now see what you've done?' Jack balled an empty tobacco packet in his fist. 'You'd better go and talk her round before she does something silly.'

'Look me in the eye and say that, you sod!' Kay snapped back.

Jack made a sudden jerking movement towards her but thought better of it. 'Get out of 'ere before

I give you a right-hander!' He hurled the green and gold wrapping across the room.

'No! *You* get out of here and do something positive for a change.'

Inhaling deeply, Jack looked fit to burst. 'Like what?'

'Apologizing to Mum for giving another woman the son that she would have liked, for a start!'

Pushing both hands through his hair, Jack leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. 'Leave me alone,' he murmured and then shouted louder than she had ever heard him. 'Leave me fucking alone!'

'We did. And look where that got us!' With that insolent remark, Kay moved like lightning across the kitchen, heading for the door. She knew it was time to lock herself in her bedroom.

With her weekend bag firmly in one hand, Laura stormed out of the flat. She had no idea where she was heading. Maybe Harlow. Not Billy's cottage, that was for sure. The last thing she needed was to be told by her dad that her place was in the home.

Making her way through the backstreets, Jack's misdeeds flew through her mind. He had played the field back in the old days and had got away with it scot-free. She remembered Patsy's words; *Jack made love to me more times than you've given him a hot dinner.*

Seething, she walked briskly across the Mile End Road, daring the traffic to come anywhere near her. Having reached the other side in one piece, she reacted to an angry motorist by showing him two fingers.

'Hallo, Laura, mate.' Milly stood in her door full of smiles, wearing a flimsy pink housecoat and holding a green chiffon scarf. 'I've bin trying out my vacuum cleaner. Come and watch this,' she giggled. Following her friend through the brightly decorated passage, Laura couldn't help smiling. Nothing seemed to surprise Milly. Hadn't she seen her overnight suitcase?

'I only got it yesterday. Can't bring myself to suck any dirt into it.' Holding the delicate scarf in front of the brush, she pressed the switch on the vacuum cleaner and was overjoyed when the scarf disappeared into the machine.

'A kid with a new toy,' Laura smiled.

'I know.' She unzipped the cloth bag and pulled out the scarf with a flourish. 'Hey Presto!'

'You're mad.'

'Stopping long, are yer?' Milly asked, eyeing the small suitcase.

'I wouldn't mind hiding for a couple of days. Pigeons have come home to roost.' She shrugged and smiled.

''Course you can stop. Do Jack good to wonder where you've got to. I take it you didn't tell 'im?'

'I didn't know where I was going myself till I got here.'

'Oh, I'd love to do something like that.' She switched on the electric kettle. 'Especially when George and Brianny get going. He's not been out five minutes and they've clashed already.'

Pushing her shoes off, Laura lay back in an armchair. 'And you really don't mind my staying?'

''Course I don't. Be company for me. 'Ow many sugars?'

'Two. How's the wedding arrangements going?'

'Lovely. I've got myself a nice turquoise number – hat to match. I can't wait to get all dressed up, to tell the truth.'

'What about Georgie?'

'Dunno really. He shows a bit of interest sometimes, when I remind 'im that he's getting rid of his son.' She placed a cup of tea in front of Laura and sat down. 'He's changed a bit. It's all the sex he's getting now. Won't leave me alone. Thinks he's a young man again.'

'Not jumping off the wardrobe, is he?' Laura was beginning to enjoy herself. This was what she needed. A little break from all her worries.

'No, but—'

'Mum!' Brianny burst into the kitchen. 'Dad's only gone and nicked my best Ben Sherman shirt! That's twice this week!'

Laura laughed so much she had to cross her legs. Georgie Smith in a Ben Sherman – she couldn't imagine it. 'He's not wearing winkle-pickers as well, is he?' she managed to say.

'Yeah, as it 'appens,' Milly sipped her tea. 'Bought 'em off a stall down Chris Street market last week.'

'I warned 'im,' Brianny barked, 'I said I'd 'ave his suede tie if he did it again!'

'I hear you're getting married, Brianny?' Laura was longing to find out a bit more about his fiancée.

'Yeah, worse luck. Bloody country bumpkin, ain't she.' He narrowed his eyes and grinned. 'You remember – Richard Wright's little maid, Janet.' He left the room whistling.

'They been together all this time?' Laura tried not to let Richard creep into her mind.

'Yeah. Love, eh? Still, she's a good kid. She'll keep a nice front door and step. Helped me polish my windows last week as well.' Milly snatched a Rich Tea out of the biscuit barrel. 'You'll never guess who she's invited to the wedding?'

'You are joking?' Laura knew exactly who Milly was referring to. Her face said it all.

'They're coming as well.' She looked serious for a second. 'That's why I wanna look my best. Lord and lady of the manor coming to my son's wedding! Turn-up for the books, eh?'

'So Richard Wright did employ Brianny after all?' she said casually.

'Up until a few months ago when Brianny's uncle offered him work in London. He'd had enough of country life – thank Gawd.' She pulled a tiny patterned handkerchief from her pocket and wiped crumbs from the corners of her mouth. 'Getting in practise for the big day,' she giggled.

'You knew the Wrights were coming when you invited me and Liz, I suppose?'

''Course. That's why I didn't ask Jack.'

Once Milly had let Laura know that she had learned about her romance from Brianny, the floodgates opened. Laura told Milly everything and she was all ears.

'You don't still love 'im, surely?' Milly wanted [redacted].

'No, I don't. And to tell the truth, I don't think I ever did.' She became pensive. 'I've been weighing things up this last couple of weeks, once I knew about little Jac.' She pulled her cigarettes out of her handbag and offered one to Milly.

'We weren't in love. It was unreal. We needed

each other just then, that's all. We'd both arrived at a difficult patch in our lives—'

'Give over, Laura,' Milly managed to grin even though a cigarette was dangling from the side of her mouth. 'You were madly in love, the pair of you. And just about everyone on the hop fields knew it.'

'You reckon?' Laura felt herself sink again. 'I don't know. I don't know anything any more.'

'What's gonna 'appen about Jack's kid then?' Milly had a way with words no one could match. Every line was spoken as if the words were from a song. 'Gonna dump 'im on yer, is she?'

'Chance would be a fine thing, no. And that's what all the upset's about really . . . well, that and other things that have been happening lately. Horrible things.'

Milly bent her head and her eyes filled with tears. 'Yeah, I know. Poor Terry, eh? Your Kay must 'ave taken that badly.'

'Fucking 'ell, Mum!' The freckled face appeared in the doorway again. 'Dad's took me suede jacket an' all!'

'See?' Milly shrugged at Laura, 'I told yer.' She tapped one side of her head. 'Gone mad. Thinks he's nineteen instead of turned forty. You're in for a treat. He'll be back from the pub soon.'

'I'm going down there. Pull it off 'is bloody back.' Brianny grabbed some biscuits and disappeared, banging the front door behind him.

It was Milly who started to laugh first, and Laura couldn't wait for Georgie to walk through the door wearing his new look.

Her fingers flying over the keys of her typewriter, Kay was in another world. The article she had begun writing the week before had somehow turned into a short story and was now developing into a novel. More and more ideas had come to her as the main plot developed. She had started to type to take her mind off the way she had upset her mum enough to make her walk out. She was also trying to block out the picture that kept flashing through her mind of the little boy she had left behind. Last but not least, she wanted to be free from her feelings about Terry.

The room where the orphans played was light and cheerful and looked out on to a small garden. Sarah pulled the sunflower-patterned curtains slightly to one side and was reminded once again of her childhood. The young man digging the garden looked just like her brother John, who had joined the merchant navy.

'Her Ladyship will see you now.' The austere

face of Mrs Johnson showed no signs of a smile.

'How many children are there?' Sarah regretted the words as soon as they were said. She knew by the woman's reaction that it was not her place to ask and the atmosphere at Wynchling Manor was enough for anyone to realize that not only children but staff must speak only when spoken to.

Pausing to read what she had written, Kay wound back the sheet of paper in the typewriter, moved along to the word *slightly* and typed a row of x's through it.

'Kay? You coming out of there now, or what?' Jack tried to sound indifferent.

She was up and unlocking her door in no time. 'It's going really well. I don't want to stop.' Her face was glowing. She splayed her fingers and wiggled them. 'I couldn't stop,' she grinned. 'I feel as if I could go on and on writing, in my other world.'

'Yeah, well, maybe we'd best sit down and look at what's 'appening in this one.' Jack went back into the kitchen.

'I can't believe it's nine o'clock already!' Kay rummaged around in the cupboard. 'I s'pose you're worried about Mum?'

'No. I couldn't care less. She won't have gone far. Probably having a chin-wag with Liz.'

'So what did you want then?' Finding a jar of peanut butter, she opened a drawer and took out the bread knife.

'Just wondered if you was all right in there, that's all,' Jack didn't sound too convincing.

'Do you want a slice of bread and butter? There's some cheese in the fridge.'

'No thanks. I'm not hungry.' He poured himself a glass of milk. 'So what's all these hints you've been giving out lately, about moving out?'

'Jeannie at work's got a friend who's got a studio flat for rent. In Highgate. Three pounds fifty a week.' Kay reeled it off quickly while she had him listening.

'And who's gonna do your washing? Cook your dinners?'

'Me, of course.'

'And what about Zac? Where does he fit in with all this?' Jack seemed almost to be coming round to the idea.

'Things won't be any different to what they are now. He'll get a train over there instead of here, that's all.'

'Your mum won't like it, Kay. I'll tell you that now.'

'What about you? You gonna stick up for me?' She studied his face and waited.

'I s'pose I'll have to. Little cow. You're gonna go one of these days, in any case. No matter what I say.'

'I don't do it on purpose, you know. I mean I'm not deliberately setting out to cause trouble or anything.'

'No?' Jack flashed her a smile.

'I'm *not*!'

'You're a natural rebel, babe. You don't even know you're doing it. Promise me one thing, though.' He looked her straight in the eye.

'What?'

'If you ever decide you wanna get married before you're twenty-one, you won't forge my signature on the marriage certificate form.'

'You've put the idea in my head now,' she grinned.

'No, I mean it, Kay. That would really cut me up. I don't think I could forgive you if you did that.'

'Well I won't then. See, Dad, all you have to do is talk these things over with me—'

'But you're only a kid!' He was getting angry again. 'I shouldn't have to—'

'Dad!' Kay cut in. 'It doesn't matter how old or young I am. You mustn't – oh, I don't know! I can't

stand to feel as if I'm not free to come and go as I please. I've got to feel free! Otherwise it's like I'm suffocating.'

'You're overdoing it, but all right! All right. I'll try to let you fly if you must. But I tell you what, Kay. You're not gonna be able to make these demands when you get married. You can kiss your freedom goodbye then.'

'It doesn't have to be that way! Two people can . . .' Kay's voice trailed off as the sound of a woman talking to a child drifted through the open kitchen window. Both of them recognized the accent but could hardly believe their ears. Dumbstruck, they waited for the sound of the doorbell. Instead they heard three short, sharp raps on the knocker.

'You gonna answer that?' Jack had suddenly lost his nerve.

'Is that who I think it is?'

'We won't know till you answer it, Kay – will we?'

'There she is, then,' Patsy said to Jac as Kay stood in the street doorway. 'Your big sister.' She looked at Kay and managed a smile. 'He cried once you'd gone. Cried for you, I mean.'

'I can't believe you're here!' Kay laughed as Jac put his chubby arms out to her and almost leapt from Patsy's arms. She was suddenly caught between the

devil and the deep blue sea. Her mum could arrive back any minute.

'Dad's in. I don't suppose . . . ?'

'Why not,' Patsy sighed and braced herself.

'Yeah,' Kay grinned broadly, 'why not?'

Leading the way, she hugged Jac and smothered his face with kisses. 'Look who the wind's blown in, Dad.'

So wrapped up in the moment, it had escaped Kay that Jack was looking at the son he hadn't seen for nearly two and a half years.

'What's going on, Patsy?' He spoke as if little Jac were still a well-kept secret.

'Is that all you can say?' Kay kissed Jac's smiling face again. 'This funny man is your daddy. And mine. You gonna say hallo?'

'No.' Jac placed his hands either side of Kay's face and pushed her cheeks together.

'You gonna give him a kiss?'

'No.'

Jack couldn't take it in. He looked drained and ready for his bed.

Turning to Patsy, Kay pulled her into the kitchen.

'Hallo, Jack,' she said, shyly.

Swallowing hard, Jack sucked on his bottom lip and kept his eyes down. 'You OK?'

The little boy answered for her. 'Hallo – Jack!'

he giggled, which started Kay and Patsy off. 'Hallo, Jack!' Jac loved having an audience. Pointing one chubby finger at himself he said, 'Me Jac!'

Smiling through tears, Jack looked up at his small son. 'So am I.' He leaned forward and offered his hand. 'How d'yer do?'

Jac took his hand and shook it in a very grown-up fashion.

'Pleased to meet you.' He glanced sheepishly at Patsy. 'You didn't come all this way by train, did yer?'

'No. Tom drove me. He's waiting downstairs. I just thought maybe . . . try it for a week. Think of it as a little holiday.' She stroked her son's hair.

'Why don't you fetch What's-his-name up? Tom?'

'You must be joking. He's scared of what you might do to him.'

'What am I gonna do, Patsy? I've got no grudge against the man. Why should I?'

'Because he won't bring up your son?'

'Can't blame 'im for that. I'd be the same in 'is shoes.'

'You would not, Jack, and you know it.' Patsy caught his eye and a smile passed between them.

'So I'm allowed him for a week then?'

'If Jac likes it, he can stay a bit longer.' She wiped

the dribble from her son's chin. 'Do you think you'll like it, then?'

'No garden!' Jac exclaimed splaying his hands.

'Five minutes walk away. A very big garden. It's called Barmy Park and it's got swings as well.' Jack put his arms out to Jac. 'Come on. Come to your dad while your sister makes us all a cup of tea. We'll go and tell Tom to come up, shall we?'

'Yes.' Jac thought that was a good idea. 'Yes!' He looked into his father's face and repeated what he had heard so many times from Patsy. 'Got Jac's eyes!'

'No,' Patsy laughed, 'you have got your daddy's eyes.'

'No!' He pressed a finger on to each of his lids and almost whispered, 'My eyes.'

'Go on then, go to your sister. I won't be a minute.' Placing Jac in Kay's arms, Jack grinned at her. 'Still gonna move out, are yer?'

'I didn't say straight away! Maybe in six months or so.' Kay put a tissue up to Jac's nose and told him to blow.

Once Jack had left the flat to fetch Tom, Patsy sighed with relief and sat down. 'Where's your mother?' She sat erect, preparing herself for a confrontation.

'Don't ask.' Kay smiled.

'Fair enough,' Patsy shoved her hand into her pale

lilac summer coat. 'I've brought the envelope back.'

'No. I mean it, Patsy. Use it for the fare money so you can come down regularly. It's only fair on Jac. And anyway, Mum and Dad don't know about it. A couple of my relations treated me. Let's leave it at that.'

'Well, I'm not going to argue with you. Thanks.' She slipped it back in her pocket. 'I only hope I'm doing the right thing, that's all.'

'It's not carved in stone.' Kay shrugged. 'If it doesn't work out . . . Come on. Let's show Jac where he'll be sleeping. Bring his bags.'

'These are full of toys and teddy bears. The back seat of the car's full of boxes and bags of his clothes. I didn't want to bring them up in case—'

'You didn't like the look of the flat?'

'Something like that, yeah. Your mum's in for a shock when she gets back.'

'You're not kidding.' Kay let out a sigh of relief. 'She'll be pleased, Patsy. It'll be good for her.'

No sooner had Jack left than he was back. 'Tom's a funny sort of bloke, ain't he, Patsy? Kept shaking my 'and but wouldn't come up!' Jack sounded pleased about it.

'He's all right. You leave him be.' Patsy gave Jack a look of scorn. 'I'm going now. I'll phone tomorrow, see if he's settled.'

Bending down to kiss Jac goodbye, she was taken aback when he turned away and snuggled up against his new sister.

'Kiss Mummy, Jac. Don't be silly!' Kay's mildly scolding voice worked. He gave Patsy a hug and kiss.

'Be a good boy and I'll see you very soon. OK?' Swallowing hard and rolling her eyes at Kay, Patsy forced back her tears.

Jac put his thumb up. 'OK!'

'Right. I'll be on my way.' She turned to Jack and gave him a teasing smile. 'You've still got great shoulders.'

'I'm not sure I can go along with this,' Georgie Smith said, tucking into his supper of cold meat, bread and pickle. 'You should be at home with your old man, Laura.'

'She's stopping and that's final.' Milly clinked her glass of port and lemon against Laura's. 'And you can do the same for me one day,' she gave Georgie a mock warning look.

'I'll tell you what, George. I'll phone and let Jack know where I am. How's that?'

'That's more like it,' he said. 'Now then, what's on the telly?'

Leaning back in her chair, Laura decided there and then that she would only stop overnight. That

would be enough time for Jack and Kay to have a chat and sort themselves out.

'What's your birth sign, Laura?' Milly was studying the horoscopes in the Sunday paper.

'Virgo.'

Milly began to read. '*You are seldom at your best this time of the year. However, you will soon realize that nothing you have gone through has been wasted or in vain. Yesterday's lessons are tomorrow's guidelines.*'

'Thanks, Milly. That makes me feel a lot better.'

'Load of bloody rubbish,' Georgie switched on the television set. 'Life's what you make it.'

Laura smiled to herself. He was dead right there. Her mind was full of Kay and what she would make of her life. It was plain enough that she was on course for a change.

'I don't suppose you fancy giving me a lift home do you, George?'

He stared at his watch. 'It's gone eleven!'

'I know but, you know . . .'

Milly yawned. 'I knew she wouldn't make it through the night. Go on, get going. But come and see me again. I've enjoyed tonight. Had a good laugh. Done my stomach good, that 'as.'

After thanking Georgie and waving him off, Laura walked slowly up the concrete stairs and could

almost hear the echo of her own breath, as well as her footsteps. She couldn't wait to see Jack's face. He would be worried and upset. His self-esteem had been a bit on the low side.

Not surprised to see the lights were still on at that late hour, she turned the key and closed the door quietly behind her in case Kay was in bed, and made for the living room.

'Oh, you're back then?'

Laura looked from Jack to Kay. They didn't look too worried. The reverse, in fact.

'I thought, you know, you just might have been a bit concerned!' Laura cursed herself for coming back too soon. She should have stayed the night and given them both something to think about.

Getting up, Jack took Laura by the arm. 'I've got something to show you.'

With one finger on his lips, he carefully opened the spare-bedroom door. A small night-light was on and the soft glow just allowed them to see Jac with his thumb in his mouth and an old brown toy dog under one arm. He was sound asleep.

Laura crept forward and gazed down at him. With her hand firmly over her mouth she looked to Jack for an answer. He just shrugged, pressed his lips together and did his utmost not to cry, but a tear was in each eye and beginning to trickle down.

Kissing Laura and Jack goodnight, Kay went to her room without saying a word. She knew that this was probably one of the greatest experiences they would ever have; the best thing in the world for them was to share it together, without her. Besides which, she couldn't wait to get back to her story which was almost certainly going to include Jac. She could write down her innermost feelings and maybe one day her mum and dad would read what had really been going on.

'Can't you advise us where to go? This is all foreign to us. We haven't been further than the Isle of Sheppey.'

'Isle of Wight,' Billy corrected. 'I always took Laura and her mother to the Isle of Wight when she was small. I've never much fancied Sheppey.'

The travel agent leaned back in the chair, narrowed his eyes and suggested a tour. 'I'm thinking of Austria. Mountains and lakes. Holland and the tulip fields. Clean air, not too hot. Flowers everywhere. Springtime.'

'Tulips from Amsterdam . . .' Billy was warming to the idea.

'How far is it?' Liz was beginning to wish she hadn't accepted Jack and Laura's offer. The Isle of Sheppey would have suited her.

'I take it you do have passports?' The travel agent seemed to be in a world of his own.

'No. But our Kay can fill us in on what to do. She's been abroad. Went to Spain, if you don't mind! Cheeky cow forged her passport form.'

'That's it, tell the whole bloody world!' Liz shot Billy a look to kill.

'Why not take a brochure and have a browse at your leisure?' The man smiled benignly at them.

'What about foreign money? How do we go about that?' Liz asked.

'We can arrange currency for you.' He pushed a colourful brochure in front of them. 'Please come back when you've found something you like.' He looked at his watch and raised his eyebrows.

'Dutch people, innit? Over there?'

'Ye – es. In the main, in Holland.'

Liz flicked through the shiny pages. 'So we'd get from one place to another by coach?'

'Mmmm. That's usually the way.'

'And stop in different hotels?'

'Yes. You'll be moving on from place to place.'

'And how much is this gonna cost?' Billy had no intention of leaving until the man had answered all his questions.

Having little faith that his time spent with this couple would achieve a sale, the travel agent pulled

the brochure towards him and turned to a page near the back. 'All the prices, for the different tours, are listed here.' He showed them a pink insert.

'Mmmm. The small print,' Liz said suspiciously. She sniffed and looked at Billy. 'I don't know what you've got against Sheppey.'

'OK,' Billy suddenly said to the man. 'You're on. We'll take it. Two to Austria. We'll leave it to you to sort the coaches and that. Send us a bill with all the charges on.' He reeled off his address and slapped his cap back on. 'We'll get the passports sorted out.'

Pushing his hand into the travel agent's palm, he gripped it tight and shook heartily. 'Thanks for all your 'elp.'

'It doesn't quite work that way.' The bemused man tried to keep a straight face. 'You choose, and we—'

'Stone me. D'yer want our business or not? Just pick what you think'd suit us. Come on, Liz, let's get going. My belly's rumbling.' He gave the man a show of his hand. 'You've got an honest face. We trust you to sort something out. All the best.'

Surprised by this sudden sweeping conclusion, Liz could only shrug at the man behind the desk. 'I s'pose that's it, then?'

'It would appear so.' He looked far from pleased.

'Make sure we're in separate rooms, only we're not married,' she smiled, and followed Billy out.

Tucking into their dinner in the pie shop, Billy grimaced at a family with five children who were making a racket. 'I'd show 'em my belt if they were mine.'

'You never used it on Laura, surely?'

'Never 'ad to. Any cheek and my hand went to the buckle. She soon came round. Never 'ad to lay a finger on 'er. A look was enough.'

'I bet it was.' Liz dipped a forkful of pie into the liquor.

'So where d'yer reckon this money did come from then? If it wasn't a win on the dogs?'

'I know where it came from, Billy. I know full well. Bert's brothers. The Brothers Bung, as I used to call 'em. It's not the first time they've bunged me a little treat on the quiet. Bert would 'ave blown 'is top if he'd 'ave known. Pride, eh?'

'Jack's just as bad. Let 'im try eating pride. Soon lose weight.'

'What sort of foreign food d'yer reckon they eat out there in Austria?'

'Dunno. Kangaroos, perhaps?'

'Silly bleeder. That's Australia.'

'Is it? Oh well . . . you never know.'

Liz waited for him to finish his sentence but it

became apparent that he had. 'You never know what?'

'We might go out there an' all, one day. Australia. I expect that's where our Kay'll end up.'

Willing herself not to laugh at him, she asked why Australia.

''Cos that's the furthest bloody corner of the world, innit?'

Sitting cross-legged by Terry's freshly dug grave, Kay ran her fingers over the flowers and dried wild hops she had brought with her, and wondered why she felt so light inside.

'You don't know how pleased I am to see you here.' It was Ray. He looked tired and drawn. 'Of all people you're the only one he really cared about, apart from his mum.'

Kay reached out and took Ray's hand. 'Come and sit down. It feels OK. And it's as close as we're gonna get.'

'So what now?' Ray said, settling himself down beside her.

'I don't know. One day at a time, I suppose?'

'Yeah. That's it. One day at a time.' He smiled at her and nodded. 'Thanks for being here.'

'And you,' she took his slim hand in hers and squeezed it. 'We'll be OK. We'll be fine.'

'So long as this weather holds out,' he said, admiring the blue sky dotted with cotton wool clouds.

'Yep. So long as that sun keeps on keeping on, eh?' She leaned her head on his shoulder and he responded by rubbing his cheek on her blonde silky hair.

'How's Zacchi?'

'Oh, he's OK. Wrote a nice poem for Terry. I'll let you have a copy.'

'Will you talk to me about him, Kay? All those years when you played together down hoppin' – all of it?'

''Course I will. But not now though, eh? In time. Bit by bit. Until we can laugh at him again. That's when we'll know we're over it. It will happen. It's beginning to already with my uncle Bert. I can think about him now, the way he really was. And it's OK.'

'That's good.'

'Did I tell you I've got a little brother now?'

'No. I didn't know that.'

'Yeah, he's lovely. And he looks like me.'

'I've got a little sister. She can be a cow sometimes . . . nearly three and bossy already.'

'But you wouldn't be without her.'

'No. I wouldn't be without her.'

Kay trailed one finger across the dark mound of rich earth and remembered Sid in the park and what he had said about Terry when he was in hospital. *If he is hovering between this world and the next he'll be able to see you . . .*

Kay had a strong feeling that Terry was hovering close to them now, and smiling. She couldn't describe it, but she felt his warm happy presence and from the way Ray was relaxed with his face to the sun, she imagined he too could feel that Terry had not quite made that final departure.

Her mind was full of that black tin hoppers' hut on the common, the white sheets smelling of washing powder and starch. His mum's faded curtain. The small Primus stove and the oil-lamp nailed to a wooden stretcher on the wall. It was as if it still existed. But of course it didn't. The hut, like all the others on the common, had been smashed to the ground and grass was growing where Terry's mum's polished lino used to lie.

But still in Kay's mind the hut was as real now as it was then. And so was Terry. Nothing could destroy what was in her mind. The memory of him would be with her forever. And one day she would be able to think back and enjoy their times together all over again, no matter which part of the world she chose to live in.

Looking around and admiring the small, well-kept patches of garden dotted between the white marble tombstones, Ray slowly nodded. 'It's funny; I never imagined a graveyard to be like this. It's really peaceful and, I dunno . . . alive. All these flowers.'

'Yeah. I know what you mean.'

Enjoying the tranquillity, the two of them sat there in the warmth of the sun, allowing time and space to move in and begin to soothe the knots of pain inside.

They were by no means alone. Others were there. Some removing fading flowers and replacing them with fresh ones. The bereaved, quietly getting on and dealing with their loss in their own way. One or two were tearful, but on the whole most of the relatives and friends looked happy – some were even smiling as they chatted to each other between the graves.

'We'll be all right,' Kay murmured, and locked her fingers in Ray's. 'We'll be fine. You'll see.'

SALLY WORBOYES

Over Bethnal Green

Jessie Smith's hope of a blissful married life is dashed when her husband Tom is called up for army training. She had been looking forward to living with him and baby Billy in their small terraced house in Bethnal Green, even though Tom's irresponsible behaviour sometimes borders on the downright criminal. But there is more to fear – the horror of a new world war.

When Tom is sent abroad and the Blitz begins, Jessie is left to cope with the baby alone. Her twin, Hannah, has been recruited to the secret establishment Station X at Bletchley Park. Immersed in her work decoding German messages, Hannah has no idea of Jessie's desperation. And when Tom does a runner and goes AWOL, things get rapidly worse . . .

In OVER BETHNAL GREEN, Sally Worboyes once again captures the vibrant spirit of the East End during the forties, and the resilience and character of those who lived there.

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder & Stoughton

SALLY WORBOYES

Wild Hops

It is 1959 and emotions are running high in the Kent hop fields, where the harvest is traditionally picked by East Enders on their summer break. Picking by hand is becoming a thing of the past as mechanisation takes over. The Armstrong family – Jack, Laura and their daughter, Kay – are devastated by the news. Far from the bustle of Stepney, the hop fields offer hard work but fresh clean air and lively social gatherings around the campfires.

While Jack leads the protest against the machines, Laura Armstrong is otherwise preoccupied: will this mean the end of her seasonal love affair with the farm owner, Richard Wright? And what of Kay who, on the brink of womanhood, craves adventure and creates turmoil when she and the handsome gypsy lad, Zacchi, meet in secret?

As tensions grow between the East Enders and the local Romanies, it becomes clear that this summer will change lives forever . . .

WILD HOPS is a vibrant tale of illicit love, firm friendships and the indomitable character of the East Enders.

'Sizzles with passion' *Guardian*

CORONET BOOKS
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SALLY WORBOYES

Girl from Brick Lane

Not all is as it seems at Number 10 Beaumont Square. The apparently perfect marriage of Tobias and Grace Wellington is fractured when a dark secret emerges. But to the public eye, nothing changes.

However twenty years later Tobias' past catches up with him. Flora Brown and her daughter Beanie are employed below stairs as cook and scullery maid. Beanie is the illegitimate daughter Flora conceived with Tobias all those years ago. Tobias fears that she will talk if he sacks her, so he has no choice but to let them stay: him above the stairs and them below.

The Wellingtons' offspring, Sarah and Herbert, have no idea that the scullery maid is their half-sister. Sarah and Beanie become great friends; Herbert, however, is a class snob and dislikes Beanie intensely. In the meantime Grace finds that she likes and trusts her cook: they are both suffragettes. During a few sherries one night the truth about Beanie comes out. After tears and apologies, the two women become even closer and vow never to tell the children that they share the same father.

However, secrets are hard to keep and inevitably the wrong person gets hold of the right information.

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SALLY WORBOYES

Banished from Bow

Harriet was abandoned as a child in nineteenth-century London's East End. Ragged and terrified, she was forced to scavenge for her food until Mary Dean found her and took her to a smart house in Bow where she was brought up as a sister to Mary and her younger brother Arthur.

But 17 years later, Harriet and Arthur have fallen in love, and Harriet is pregnant. Driven out of Bow by neighbours who spit at them and call them heathens, they seek refuge in two rented rooms in Stepney.

Eking out a meagre but free existence, they are happy, but then Arthur, like so many others working as railway delivery-men, is caught pilfering and faces a prison sentence. However this is soon to be the least of their worries. Harriet has kept a diary she stole as a child, the diary of the perpetrator of the Whitechapel killings. The Jack the Ripper murders. And now the owner of the diary has returned to the East End in search of Harriet and the diary – and will stop at nothing to get it back . . .

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SALLY WORBOYES

Down by Tobacco Dock

In 1876 the homes of the poor working class in the East End are being replaced by splendid houses for the rich. When Kelly's yard comes under threat, Maria Bertram inspires in her neighbours a rebellion against eviction.

But when a woman is found murdered in Tobacco Dock and the young man she loves is arrested, Maria must do everything in her power to prove his innocence and save him from a public hanging.

Without realising it, she puts her own life at risk when she stumbles across a web of deceit in the planners' office. The murderer is much closer to home than she thinks . . .

The new East End saga by Sally Worboyes brings a pivotal period in history vividly to life, and will enthral her hundreds of thousands of fans.

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder & Stoughton

'Unbridled passions run riot' *Daily Mail*

DOWN STEPNEY WAY

Emotions are running high in the East End with Blackshirts marching through the streets and the Jewish community under threat of violence. In Bethnal Green, Emmie is giving love and support to Hannah Blake, who is being forced by her cold-hearted mother to join the Blackshirts, despite her deep misgivings. Emmie is aware of the darkness surrounding Hannah's wretched past, but is bound by a vow of silence not to tell . . .

DOCKER'S DAUGHTER

Kay Armstrong breaks away from her tough East End background where her friends are turning to crime and gets work in the City. Her friends introduce her to a different scene: the glamour of fashionable restaurants and the pleasures of drinking. But then Kay goes too far and plans a holiday that involves forging a passport. While she is in trouble with the law, the attractive Romany Zacchi reappears and Kay has some hard choices to make . . .

Don't miss Sally Worboyes other East End sagas also available from Coronet:
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